Garden of Eden

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Garden of Eden

by Izgnanik

Summary

Will Graham is an exceptional human, knowing and understanding a plethora of things. He was Gold among Pyrite. But he was plagued with darkness having stepped into the minds of serial killers over again.

Kerene Eden is a person who just wants to get by, even if it means self-neglect and internalization. Keen to using sarcasm and attitude to gain distance from herself and the world, now loneliness and trauma was all she knew.

Together, they could turn immovable forces and stop hail storms. But in Wolf's Trap - everything is not what it seems.

Notes

Aye, Ayh here! I've been working on getting into this series as I started watching Hannibal on Netflix, and let me tell you - I have fallen unhealthily more in love with Mads Mikkelson than anything in the world (first fell in love with him from Casino Royale and then Polar). I hope you enjoy this, and examine every chapter to come. This is going to be a test of your detective abilities! I want to see how many of you catch on to the breadcrumbs I leave behind. :) Anyways, into this new year, I hope to tie loose ends and start with new stories. I hope you enjoy, and that you are safe, prosperous, and your wishes come true! Take care, be safe, and remember that you are loved. :) -A

See the end of the work for more notes

Prologue. The Accident.

“Kerene!” Called her father. “Don’t get too close to the river. You’re not wearing your vest.”

“I’m being safe.” She waved her reflective cloth on her waist. “Besides, hunting season doesn’t start until next week.”

“Yeah, but some people don't listen.” He stated.

She rolled her eyes, and looked out to the woods around them. It was a family tradition to go out hunting just when the season commenced, something her mother must’ve hated when she was around. Kerene had begun to think that the only reason she left was because she hated everything her father was, not only that but what he had imprinted on his daughter.

The spitting image of him.

“I’m going to check the traps.” She said over her shoulder.

“Don’t travel too far.”

“I’m just going to the rabbit traps. That’s it.”

“*Hey*.” Her father called.

“I’ll be safe. I promise.” She chuckled, walking down the slight slope towards the rabbit holes.

They had their own piece of land deep in the woods. A family owned home, starting with Kerene’s grandfather. Passed down to her father, and soon to her. She was one of the last of the family name, until she married of course.

Kerene wandered down to the traps, most untouched. One had managed to snag a rabbit, still panicking within the trap. She approached, leaned over, and watched it’s nose tremble. She stared at herself in the reflection of it’s eye. The cottontail rabbit couldn’t have been any younger than a few months, just about the size of Kerene’s palms cupped together, probably close to dying from anxiety.

Kerene watched the kit and despite knowing this was a way of living in the woods, it wasn’t the only option. She removed the door from the trap, and almost instantly the rabbit vanished from sight.

She sighed.

“Kerene!” Her father called. “Come inside.”

“Coming!” She yelled back, glancing to the hide where the bunny vanished, starting up the hill carefully.

Kerene's feet slid down the hill, she tried pushing up the slope with her hands.

One of the rabbit traps snapped shut.

She turned around, eyeing where she'd been.

"Kerene!" Her father appeared above on the hill.

"One of the traps activated." She pointed out towards the tree line.

"Okay, well," he glanced behind him to the sun setting. "Go on, get it. Bring it back."

Kerene shuffled back down the hill, still in sight of her father, moving towards one of the traps. She stood in confusion, brow pulled tight together, and approached the trap.

Within the trap sat an albino white rabbit, it's red eyes watching her in panic.

"Dad?" She called out, stepping back. "Dad?"

"What's wrong?" He took a step down the hill. "Kerene?"

Kerene stepped back and a sound whipped through the air, ripping into her.

"*Kerene!"*

A bullet had been fired, striking Kerene below the collarbone on her left side. Her body flailed with the impact, and her foot faltered back.

The echo of her father screaming drowned out with pain in her head, her eyes focused on the blood drenching her shirt. Gravity pulling her back, arms out, hands outstretched to the blue sky above, and her head hit the soil.

Everything was slow...

Painless...

Quiet...

Lifeless…

Empty.

The Meeting.

Chapter Notes

> Aye! The first and last Wednesday of the month will be my updating days, so hopefully I can keep this going. There is much writing and editing to do with this story, so without furtherado, enjoy. :) Take care and be safe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

" *Kerene* !"

Kerene shot up from her bed, gasping, back drenched in sweat, clutching her collar. Tears running down her face as she came to the realization that she had another night terror, and this time it felt too real. She sobbed until she came back down, holding her blanket too tight.

The accident was two years ago.

She'd gone through physical therapy to regain control in her left arm, group therapies that didn't ever help, anger management classes, taken medication for depression and borderline, everything.

She was a mess.

Kerene had woken up before her alarm clock, and watched the sun come up over the horizon, cup of coffee in hand.

Her day would resume as usual; snack bar for breakfast, coffee for the road, catch the bus to the terminal, go to therapy. From therapy go to catch the bus to her part time job for four hours, steal some food for dinner, and catch the bus to go home. The only thing that would change is the therapy session.

She's tried one on one therapy, music therapy, group therapy, art therapy, but they all felt the same. They all offered the same small assistance.

Kerene caught the bus to the terminal, tucked in the back until the bus approached, sat by the door. First in, first out. She got off at the stop just across from the new building she'd attend for maybe two sessions, and then move along to another in the city. This one was group therapy.

She was sat in a circle of eight, the instructor pouring himself a cup of coffee in the corner, and everyone settled in. Her eyes, like others, examined those in the room.

"Good morning everyone." Said the instructor.

Everyone mumbled back to him as he sat.

Another body joined the room late, standing in the doorway.

“Ah. Come in.”

Everyone’s eyes averted to the doorway, Kerene as well.

A young and withered man stood there, tucked softly in his sweater, satchel around his shoulders clutching it nervously. He was a strange sort of character, a being of many wonders. Kerene watched as the instructor offered out his own chair and found another to unfold. Kerene watched the stranger with curious eyes, his doe like expression caught hers, and avoided her like staring into the sun.

“Alright. Now that we’re all situated, I see some new faces.” Said the therapist. “We could all go around the room introducing ourselves. A fact about us, and what’s drawn us here.” The therapist, a person away from Kerene, went clockwise, towards the enticing stranger.

Everyone quietly or boldly introduced themselves, some offered to remain in silence and their choice was respected. The attention fell on the stranger, and Kerene watched him.

“My name is Will Graham.” He said. “I adopt strays.”

“Do you mind if you tell us why you came here today? What brought you to us?”

His eyes jumped around the crowd, and over Kerene. “I need to learn to cope.”

“And you will, in time. Thank you for sharing.”

Kerene watched her own hands until the voices had gone quiet; she lifted her head to find they were all watching her. All but Will. She took a deep, shaking breath. Her hand over her collarbone. “My name is Kerene... Eden.” She paused. “I used to.. love writing.”

“And what brought you to us today, Kerene?”

Kerene looked around the group, passing over Will slowly. “This is the fifth group I’ve been to. I won’t be here long.”

The room remained quiet for a moment longer.

“Thank you for sharing.” Said the instructor, and she resumed to fade into the background. She looked across the group to Will, and he quickly turned away.

Throughout the session, Kerene realized that she didn’t talk much but wasn’t obligated to do so. The whole reason for therapy is to overcome an obstacle, and to continue on in life and cope. She was coping with the night terrors, and despite the constant fear of something that wasn’t around anymore - she understood there was a problem.

Maybe she didn’t want to fix it.

When her focus came back forward, the group had taken a break, and many had gotten up for some coffee from the container, and poured some hot water for their tea. Kerene remained seated, arms around herself. Will remained seated as well, stimming his foot while watching the room.

Their eyes met briefly.

When the group came back together, they'd discussed their daily activities in order to cope. Some of them wrote in books about their feelings, their days, their jobs. Some of them picked up a new hobby to ease the anger; knitting, rowing, biking, painting. Some meditated in gardens, in their cramped living rooms, and even in their baths.

They all had a way of coping.

"Now, what are some bad habits we have?"

"Smoking." Someone said.

"*Okay."*

"Missing meals."

"Alright."

"Not drinking enough water."

"Yep."

"Isolation."

"*Definitely."*

"Thinking of death."

The room went quiet, focusing in on Kerene.

Her eyes panned the room.

"It is common for someone who is suffering from any sort of trauma or disorder to think of death." Said the therapist. "And it is also not uncommon to feel helpless, that seeking help may feel weak, and a burden. It is all part of a process of healing."

Kerene looked to the floor.

"Many here have experienced strong urges to want to end their lives, and they didn't because they had a reason."

"What if there is no reason? What if we just have a wake-sleep cycle?" She asked. "And there's no purpose for us but to be a pawn in God's game?"

“Whether you believe in God or not, we all have a reason for being here. To seek help, or to take this moment to seek new opportunities. Or new groups that may offer you better help.” The therapist turned to the group. “There will come a time in your life, or maybe you’ve already been there or are approaching it, but you will have to stop. You will be at many crossroads in your life, but this one is important.”

Kerene felt the eyes shift off of her, and she could breathe.

“This crossroad will test your strengths, it knows your weaknesses, and it knows *you.* It may come to you in the form of a family member, a friend, a co-worker, or even a bill - but you will be tested, and you will overcome every obstacle you have, even if it hurts. You have the ability to cope with things, and by the sound of it, most of you have healthy ways of coping. Others are on their way. But I believe you all have strength in you, and from within yourself or a physical thing, you will find it.”

The session had ended soon after, and the crowd waited their turn before asking the therapist a few questions alone. Kerene moved to the table to grab a cup of coffee before leaving. Standing before her was Will Graham. She stepped in beside him, waiting for the new pot of coffee to stop brewing.

“Hi.” She said.

He glanced at her and back to the coffee, his eyes trained on it. “Hi.”

“You’re new here?”

“I won’t be here long.”

“How come?”

He shrugged one shoulder, “Why do *you* bounce session to session?”

She paused, “I can’t seem to find something to stop the nightmares.”

For a moment, he’d pulled his attention from the coffee brewing, and stared at her. She was beautiful; golden with olive undertones, dark eyes, round face. *Average,* but *not.* She had this lively spark hiding in her eyes, and he knew then he would dream about her.

Kerene cleared her throat, “What have you tried so far?”

“Meaning?”

“Therapy.”

He shrugged one shoulder again, “Everything?”

“Feels like I have too.” She scoffed, “I’ve done music therapy, art therapy, yoga, one on one, and nothing worked. I just got more medication, and it doesn’t stop the thoughts, or the night terrors, or,” she paused, facial expression reading discomfort, “The memories.”

The coffee stopped brewing, and Will gestured forward for her to grab the first cup.

“Thank you.” She moved down the table after she’d poured her cup.

Will joined her side again by the cream, sugar, and others. “Will you be here tomorrow?”

She met his glance, “I guess. Will you?”

“I guess.”

Kerene nodded. “I’ll see you tomorrow then?”

He nodded back, she smiled softly and stepped around him.

“Bye.”

He raised his hand to wave, cupping his coffee close, and smiled when she’d turned away.

Kerene glanced back when she’d reached the door to see his content smile, and continued on to the bus stop. She drank her coffee along the way, and changed into her uniform when she got there. Being a dish washer for one of the town’s busiest restaurants wasn’t her plan, but it happened and she’d been part-time for a while now.

When they weren’t looking, she’d take some food home for dinner, and wouldn’t lift her head until the shift was over. On her way out, she said goodbye to the remaining kitchen staff, and managed to get to the bus stop in time to catch the last run. The ride home was a quiet one, no one else on the bus but her and the driver.

She watched the dark city pass her by, and entered the so-called slums of the city.

Kerene moved quickly to her apartment building.

Once inside, she warmed up the soup she’d grabbed, and sat at the lonely table. The stray cats she’d fed in the alley didn’t come to bother her, and the rain didn’t come thundering down. She bathed, and dried her hair, lying in bed alone.

The darkness soothed her anxiousness, but she knew *eventually* she would have to close her eyes and drift off to the plane where monsters came alive.

But there was a bright light at the end of the dark tunnel, a waving friend, a kind smile.

Will.

Will would be waiting for her tomorrow. And she wouldn’t let him down.

Chapter End Notes

The thought of Will in his cozy sweaters, vests, and coats really just make me happy. :)

Good Friends.

Chapter Notes

Aye! Chapter update, yay! I love this story, and how it is turning out. I just hope that it'll end how I want, or in a direction that is pleasurable. Anyways, I hope you enjoy, stick around, and enjoy the ride. :) Take care, and be safe. :)

This book will be updated every first and last Wednesday of the month. :)

The night terrors came, as usual. She woke to her alarm blaring in her ear this time with her heart racing, gazing up at the ceiling. The sun had come over the horizon, and she'd calmed herself down enough to set the blanket into her lap. But the flashes before her eyes kept coming.

She got up, splashing her face with cold water, and went about her morning. She needed to go to the store to get more snack bars. She wasn't good in the mornings, and wouldn't have enough time to cook a proper meal. Who was she kidding? If she had the option, she would stay at home until she'd cluttered up the corners of every room. Until she was standing in her own filth, and slept all hours of the day. She didn't know how to live if she didn't have a working schedule.

Kerene grabbed the last bar and headed for the bus.

Today she would see Will, maybe for the last time. Would he leave to a different group after? Would he stay? She thought about the complete stranger as she got off the bus, walking towards the meeting hall. She reached for the door as people were leaving, and excused herself past them.

Standing in the doorway of the therapy session, her eyes scanned the room.

She saw the same people she had the day previous, and yet - no Will.

Maybe he was running late? But why lie to herself? He probably ran for the hills when she said she would come back the next day. How idiotic of her, how pathetic, to think she could have a friend in a timeline like this? She was all kinds of messed up.

She should just leave now and face the sad music. She was alone in feeling and thought, and she always would be.

Kerene started for the door, opening it before the visitor outside could grab it.

She came face to face with Will. He looked just as puzzled as she did but her surprise turned to excitement. "Will. Hi."

“Good morning.” He bowed his head, his eyes averted momentarily.

“Morning.”

He paused for a moment before looking up at her. “Are you leaving?”

“Uh, no. Just.. a breath of air.”

He nodded. “I’ll leave you alone then.”

“I don’t mind the company.”

Will stayed put.

“How was your night?” She asked.

“Usual.”

“How were the strays? Is it cats or dogs?”

“Dogs.”

Kerene nodded.

“And they were fine. Not rowdy at all.”

She hummed, “A group of dogs. I would think they’d cause problems.”

“They don’t.”

They gazed at each other for a bit before Kerene pointed over her shoulder, “I think I’m all set now. We should probably grab a seat.”

Following inside, they found seats, within sight of each other but not shoulder to shoulder. The session started as it did the day before, with newcomers around, they introduced themselves again.

This time, Kerene didn’t hesitate. “My name is Kerene.” She said, “I have trouble sleeping sometimes. I came here to.. Understand myself.”

“Thank you Kerene.” Said the therapist.

Kerene looked to Will, and he looked down at his cup of coffee.

When they’d stopped for their break, Will and Kerene stood side by side by the coffee table.

“How long have you been going group to group?” Kerene asked.

“A while.”

Kerene nodded, “I’ve been doing this for almost a year now.”

“You haven’t found anything yet?”

“Well, my anger management advisor says it’s because I’m easily irritable and *like a line leading up to a stack of dynamites,* he said.”

“How poetic.”

“I almost did blow up on him when he said that. *Ironic* is a better word.”

Will smirked.

Kerene prided herself on that little victory smile. “So, what about tomorrow?”

He looked at her.

“Will you be here tomorrow?”

He shrugged, “Will you?”

“Maybe.”

“I mean, where else would you go that you haven’t already?”

“Touché.” She gestured. “Unless you know someone who specializes in *deep* trauma, I don’t think there’s anywhere I have left to go.”

“I’m sure there’s someone out there for the both of us.”

Kerene looked at him, and his eyes fell to his coffee cup again. She figured he wasn’t very social, and into the whole eye contact thing. She gave that excuse to make up for it. She looked around the room to the others.

“They make it look so easy.” She sighed.

“What?”

“To want help.”

“Don't *you* want help?”

“There’s a shame that comes with it.”

Will nodded softly.

“You can’t just *ask* for help. You have to.. be okay with someone cross examining your life, and judging it, and lingering in places you don’t want them to. Once you do it’s all in or nothing. They’re in your life, and you have no control over it. They have no boundaries.”

“Maybe instead of seeking the help of a professional who you feel alienated from, first you should speak to someone who comes from experience.”

“Is that what you do?”

“If I talked to people.”

“You’re talking to me.”

“That’s different.”

Kerene smiled softly. “Is this your official *unofficial* document to be my friend?”

Will swayed, switched his coffee between his hands. “If it makes you better.” He met her eyes, and she saw the sincerity in them.

At that moment, she knew they’d be inseparable.

When the session ended, Will walked Kerene out to the bus stop.

“You know, it only took one year to find someone who understood me.” Kerene said. “Where have you been this whole time?”

Will shrugged.

“Maybe we didn’t need each other yet.”

“Maybe.”

Kerene smiled as they came to the bus stop, waiting in momentary silence. “Just to be clear, you’re not a *weirdo* or anything.”

He paused, “If I say *yes* , am I going to get praised or get a disappointed reaction?”

“I don’t know yet.” She swayed on the balls of her feet.

“Oh.”

The bus approached. Their time was ending.

“Do you want to hang out sometime?” Kerene asked boldly. “Outside of therapy?”

Will struggled on words, forming them but no words came out.

“I’ll give you my number.” She insisted, holding her hand out.

Instead of words, Will offered his phone out and the bus pulled ahead of them. Saving her number, she held it back out to him and stepped on the bus.

“See you tomorrow?”

Will clutched his phone. “Yeah.”

Kerene smiled as she turned away and sat down.

Will stepped back, watching her through the window, and she waved. He waved back at her as the bus began to take off.

This exact moment they both knew their lives would be intertwined. They would be inseparable, and they would understand everything there was to know between them. There would be no boundaries they couldn't cross.

They were each one side to the same coin.

Eight Months Later.

Chapter Notes

> Aye! The first Wednesday of the month has come! Here is the update. I'm currently working on other interesting stories to birth this year, so stay tuned! More Hannibal stories to come. :) Take care, and be safe. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kerene turned over in her bed, hair in disarray when she heard it. The quiet whimpering. The *night terrors* .

With a deep breath, she rolled out of bed and crossed the hallway. The bedroom across from hers held a different atmosphere; it was darker, the air was thick with heat and discomfort. She leaned in the doorway before crossing the room, and gently brushing back the curtains.

The horizon glowed red as the sun began to rise.

Rounding the bed to pull the other curtains aside, the restless body in the sheets didn't wake. Only whimpering and stretching in every position on his back. He wore almost an identical shirt to Kerene, in only his briefs as well.

She returned to her position by the doorway to not frighten him straight out of his terror. "Will." She called softly. "Will?"

Will's staggering breath didn't lessen, it was like he was running heavily in his dream.

She neared the foot of the bed, "Will. Wake up." She called a little louder. " *Will* ."

Will's eyes shot open as he sat up to assess his surroundings. He only found Kerene standing before him as he gasped, clutching the blankets.

Kerene watched him, "You're okay. It's 5:34 in the morning. It's July 8th, it's Saturday." She grounded him. "You're home."

Will shut his mouth, running his sweaty palms over the blanket, and collected his breath slowly.

"I'll start the coffee." She turned away for the kitchen.

Will's eyes looked to the horizon. The sun was coming up, but so were the clouds.

When Will had collected himself, splashing water on his face in the bathroom, and coming down the stairs he was greeted by the stray dogs he'd collected. He let them roam outside

before he moved for the kitchen.

Kerene was hard at work, already having the coffee brewing, and cracking together some eggs while toast was being browned. She set down a perfected cup of coffee at the table, and turned back to cooking. Will sat down, facing her.

Kerene glanced over. “You know, Candi says she’ll be out of the state for a bit.” She said suddenly.

“Candi. How is she?” Will found his voice.

“She’s good, I guess. Just applied for a new job in Vermont, and her and her girlfriend are still together.”

“I never liked her girlfriend.” He stated.

“Well, you can’t show someone the light when they’re deeply in love. They can’t be told what to do. Only until after they’ve been hurt.” Kerene said, “You know that.”

Will hummed as he sipped his coffee.

“Anyways, she told me we could borrow the car until she gets back.”

“What’s the catch?”

“Pick her up from the airport when she gets back.”

“That implies giving her girlfriend a ride as well.”

Kerene rested her hands on the counter top as the eggs cooked, “I know you had a bad experience with her. You told her the truth, and she blew up on you-”

“ *That* is an understatement.”

“Candi forgives you. That’s enough.”

“I’ll harbor my vengeance. Thank you.” He mumbled over his cup.

Kerene couldn’t help but smirk softly, and turned off the stove. She put their food on a plate, and they sat down across from each other as the dogs rushed by the window outside. Will’s eyes trained on them, Kerene’s eyes on him.

He had been restless for some nights now. Some recent cases he’d begun researching about had him anxious, too bothered to the point where it haunted him in his unconscious state. It worried Kerene, that she couldn’t get into his head and make all the bad things go away.

“Do you want to talk about it?” She asked softly.

He turned his eyes back to his plate. “No.”

She nodded.

“Not yet.”

“Okay. Whenever you want to, I’m here.”

“I know.” He pushed his eggs around.

Kerene exhaled deeply, looking at the dogs. She groaned, “Casper’s in the trash again.” She stood up.

“I got it.” He prepared to stand.

“No, I’ve got it. You eat, I’ll be back.” Kerene insisted, opening the back door, and standing on the porch.

Some dogs, without even being called, rushed up in excitement to her feet and sat. Casper, the disobedient Alentejo, continued to rummage through the trash.

“Casper.” She clapped, and he turned. “What did I tell you? Bad *boy*. Let’s go.”

The dogs at her feet stood up.

“Get *out* of the trash.”

Casper stepped away from the trash, and towards her. Opening the door, they all flooded inside. Casper moved with his tail between his legs, head down, and passed her.

Kerene sat back down in front of Will, and they continued as if there weren’t any interruptions, or dogs moving about. “Anyways. Candi left her car keys at her apartment in the mailbox, she just wants us to be respectable, and not get any tickets.”

“When are you ever irresponsible?” He questioned.

“It’s just a statement.”

Will scoffed.

“Until she comes back, the car is ours.”

“Which is how long?”

“A week, two weeks maybe? It’ll help us.” She insisted, “I’ll pick it up before I go to work, and tell her the *both* of us are grateful.”

Will nodded.

“Regardless of the *bitch* she loves.” Kerene shoveled the rest of her eggs into her mouth, and met Will’s smirk.

He looked down at his plate, and Kerene smiled back.

They shared a taxi down to Candi's apartment, and Kerene grabbed the keys. Candi's car was nothing too special, a little black Ford Focus. Kerene got into the car with no problem, but Will resented it.

"Come on. You don't want to be late for your lecture." She stated. "And I don't want to be late for work."

"Again."

" *Hey* . Last time, it wasn't on purpose. Come on." She started the car, and Will slumped in. She pulled out of the parking spot, starting for the academy. "Anything special going on at the school?"

"Not really." He began plucking buttons on the radio, sifting through channels.

Kerene glanced at it, but didn't stop him. "What does *not really* mean?"

"It means I don't want to talk about it." He finally sat back, looking out the window.

"Okay." Kerene tapped her fingers on the steering wheel.

They drove in silence for the rest of the ride. Kerene pulled up to the sidewalk of the academy, and Will stepped out. He lingered in the doorway.

Kerene looked at him. "What?"

Will stared at her, holding the door tightly, and deflated. "Nothing." He stepped back, "See you later."

She opened her mouth to say the same but he shut the door. Kerene watched him walk for the door, others exiting and entering past him. She took a deep breath, and pulled away from the sidewalk.

When she had gotten to work, they were setting up for a private lunch. She'd gotten the hang of everything quickly, and began assessing the room.

"So." Said her co-worker; brunette, tall, hazel eyes, *gorgeous* Jadelynn. "Candi's on vacation."

"She is." Kerene said turning the center piece perfectly.

"When are *you* going on vacation?"

"I can't afford to. I have bills to pay." She set plates around the table parallel to others across.

"Right." Jade said, "And how *is* Will?"

"As usual. Ups and downs. More downs than up recently."

“You’re not dating him, right?”

“No.” Kerene’s attention finally broke from the table to Jade. “We’re just friends.”

“Right.” Jade hummed. “So, you live together, in his house, and you pay bills with him, and take in strays.”

“What are you implying?” Kerene became defensive.

“You guys get along well.”

“We can do that as friends.”

“I understand.” She put her hands up. “I’m saying, if there *were* to be a thing, I think you’d get along a lot *more.”*

“I’m leaving this table.” Kerene collected her things.

Jade watched her, and shook her head. She followed her to the next table, helping her smooth out the table cloth. “What’s the deal then? You met Will months ago, and decided to move in.”

“We had a deal, alright?” She said, “He gets better, I get better.” Kerene put down the golden painted centerpiece. “But it seems I got better, and he got worse.”

“Is it a drug thing?”

“No.” Kerene stared. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Well, of course I don’t understand because you moved in with a complete stranger after knowing him for a month, started paying his bills, and taking care of him like he’s some orphan kid. He’s a grown man Kerene, he should be able to take care of himself. It’s not healthy for you.”

“I’m not going to take advice from someone who went back to their ex claiming true love, just to get used again.”

Jade furrowed her brow, “Screw *you* .” She turned away.

Kerene finally moved in silence, and finished up decorating the tables.

She was given a name tag.

She wrote *Ren* on it.

Her day was filled with refilling glasses, removing plates from tables, and ushering people to their designated spots. It was just a charity funding lunch, and she was more than happy to serve them. She didn’t feel compelled to socialize, doing best alone. When everyone had been situated, and the talking began, she stared at one of the chandeliers above the tables.

She could remember during her childhood of seeing one, much more elegant and bright. She couldn't place it, like a dream she couldn't exactly remember.

"Kerene. Table twelve needs water." Called a co-worker.

She crossed the distance, and began refilling glasses.

A well-tailored man pressed his hand over his own glass, there was an eager slyness to his movement, as if a snake had sprouted limps. He was weightless, airy, and, to Kerene, only superficially level-headed. "I'm all set, thank you."

She nodded, and looked to the others at the table. "Can I help you with anything else tonight?"

Someone asked for another refill of wine, and she turned away. She returned to her idle spot until the ceremony was over, and she'd begun cleaning the tables.

"Kerene." Called a co-worker. "This is your tip."

Kerene looked to the obscene amount of money in their hand, and back to them. "You're joking?"

"Some man in a nice suit left it for you, said specifically for the young lady named *Ren* . Said you were very polite, and pretty."

She grimaced, taking the money. "Great."

"You got the most tips out of all of us. Be thankful. You *are* polite and pretty." Walking off, Kerene looked to the money before tucking it away.

Her shift was over soon enough, and she started for the car. She text Will but he didn't answer immediately. She figured he was deep into work, so she let him be. She went home for the time being, and when he would call she would pick him up. But he didn't.

The sun started to fall and she called him. He didn't pick up again.

Kerene began to worry as she watched the dogs run around on the lawn.

The phone inside began to ring.

She rushed to it. "Hello?"

There was a beat of silence. " *It's me.* "

"Will, where the hell are you? I've been calling you."

" *They're flying me out to Minnesota* ."

"What? Who?"

" *I'll be back tomorrow.* " He promised.

“Will, who’s bringing you out to Minnesota?”

“ *I’m going to be overlooking something* .”

“A case?”

“ *Yeah* .”

Kerene sighed heavily, holding her head. “I don’t like this, Will.”

“ *I’ll call you when I’m off the plane.* ”

“Can you at least tell me more about this? You can’t just get on a plane and not tell me what’s going on. You can’t just drop everything and leave.”

“ *I’ll be back tomorrow.* ”

“Will-” the phone went dead. “Will?”

Staring at the phone, she looked out to the front door, and her chest felt heavy.

Where was he going? Was he safe? Who would watch him if he had a nightmare? Or if he got triggered by something he saw?

She felt like her world was spinning, and she was falling down the rabbit hole again.

The next time she saw Will was at the airport, close to the end of the next day. He looked beaten down, and she had just about the same expression. He got into the car with no word, and could feel the emotion bleeding out of her.

He opened the window.

She pulled away from the curb soundlessly.

He glanced over to her, and turned on the radio.

She shut it off.

Will turned away, “Just say it.”

Kerene shook her head in annoyance, “You have *no* consideration for how I feel.”

“Don’t I?” He teased unconsciously.

“You *don’t.”* She grew in volume. “You vanish off the face of the Earth, without even telling me a single thing, and I’m expected to be okay with that?”

“I told you I was going to Minnesota-“

“With no other context!”

“Don’t yell.” He growled.

She exhaled sharply. “I was worried *sick,* Will, if anything happened to you-“

“I was *fine.”*

“ If *anything* happened to you, I would be devastated, Will, *devastated.* That I could’ve been there to save you, but I wasn’t. I was *here,* and you were *there.* Don’t ever do that to me again, Will. I felt *alone,* and I haven’t felt like that in a *long* time.”

“I know.”

“Then why?”

He sat quietly. “Can we just go home?”

Kerene shook her head, opening her own window, and turning the radio on.

When they’d gotten home, she turned off the car and closed the door behind her before Will could say a thing. She didn’t look back as she opened the back door for the dogs to get out and do their business. Will followed like a dishonored pup, head down but filled with emotion. He was pent up with thoughts, and he didn’t know what to do.

They couldn’t go through their night like this.

Kerene was determined to be filled with anger for the night. But Will always had a way with things. He knew how to pop her bubble, and to get his hands around her heart.

She’d been outside for some time on the back porch swing, the dogs lying around her, and a blanket wrapped around her tightly. Will stepped out from the back door not meeting her eyes as he stood before her, two cups of tea in hand.

Kerene looked to the cups, then to Will’s pitiful expression. She offered out her palm, and Will placed the cup in her grasp. He managed to wedge himself beside her, shoulder to shoulder, staring out to the setting sun.

They sat silently among the dogs, sharing a swing, sipping tea.

“I’ll tell you about my day.” Will stated. “But I don’t expect you to actually listen.”

Kerene watched the side of his face.

“This case I’ve been called to analyze - it involved a serial killer in Minnesota. The *Minnesota Shrike.* The evidence was constant, always there in your face. He was after a certain young girl, one who looked like his daughter. He’d killed seven girls before we came for him.” He paused. “But I couldn’t stop him from killing his family.”

Kerene pressed a hand to her mouth in shock.

“His daughter, Abigail, he sliced her neck. As if she didn’t mean anything to him.” He said with a vengeance. “Hobbs was the *Shrike,* and Abigail was his golden ticket. Why would he do that?” He met her eyes. “Was he so desperate?”

Kerene gently clasped his forearm, and he looked down at her hand. “I don’t want you to get lost in all this. It sounds horrible, and I know you care - but you can’t get sucked into this. You care *too* much, Will. You can’t lose yourself in this work.”

“I’m their “ *specialist* ”. I oversee possible motives and investigate cases to do with bizarre behaviors.” He stated. “And I have someone attached to the hip at all times.” He said wryly.

“Quit now, Will. *Please* . Just go back to lectures. Tell them the truth.”

“Truth? What truth?”

“You’re not cut out for this.”

He furrowed his brow.

“ *You* get better. *I* get better. Wasn’t that our deal?”

He deflated, watching the horizon.

“When the nightmares started again, it was because you were getting too close to these sorts of things.” She said, “It’s time to stop.”

Will let his hand be clasped in Kerene’s, but all he could think of was the need to bathe over and over. Still feeling the spray of Hobbs' blood on his face when he pulled the trigger, Abigail's warm blood dripping through his fingers as he tried to save her, and the overwhelming pain he’d endured as the smoke cleared.

He wanted to stop, wanted to pull the brakes but he couldn’t find the will to end the adrenaline crave.

It tormented him at night.

And Kerene comforted him in the morning.

A constant cycle of harm and healing, of push and pull. It was always the same.

They just never expected a third party to get in the middle.

Chapter End Notes

See you on the 17th of February! :) Take care.

The Shrink.

Chapter Notes

> Aye! I realized I might've missed the last update, and completely apologize for that. But without further debate, here it is. New characters coming into light. :) Excited. Enjoy. Take care. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next unwanted visitor came in the form of a letter.

Will had been back from his trip to Connecticut for four days, going to lectures and back, exposing the cases he'd been on. Teaching the motives behind all of them intently. His nightmares revolving around them lessened, but didn't vanish.

Will leaned up against the kitchen table as Kerene led the dogs around the backyard, he set down his coffee cup to open the envelope, reading the letter within.

He looked to the back door with an urgent glance.

Will rushed out into the backyard, and without as much as a word, he held out the letter to Kerene. In confusion, she read it down. Looking to Will as the color faded from her face, she let the letter fall from her hand.

Will couldn't offer her the crutch she needed.

Kerene's father had committed suicide while in the hospital; he was sick in the head, had been for a few months now, yet counseling was doing him well. He was improving.

But mental illness would always prevail.

His belongings would return back to Kerene, and his body would be prepared to be buried.

In just two weeks, they'd planned a funeral and made every arrangement they could. A friend or two showed up to his wake, said their goodbyes, and grieved for Kerene. She knew they didn't carry the weight that she did, and a pat on the back wasn't going to lessen it. It was a hot, sunny Saturday as they lowered his body into the ground.

Will stood beside Kerene every step of the way. Even though he hadn't known Kerene's father, he grabbed a handful of dirt to lay him to rest. Kerene, too riddled with grief, didn't do a single thing to put her father to bed. They walked away from the grave, and she was a changed person.

The days following, she seemed aloof. Though she ate very little, hardly drank water, and worked herself until she'd come home exhausted - nothing could amount to the heaviness she'd adopted.

While sitting on the swing outback, Will stepped outside. He looked to Kerene, who'd wiped her nose quickly with the blanket wrapped around her, and stared out to the darkening sky.

"I made some soup." He said. "You want some?"

She glanced at him, and out to the yard. "Not right now. But if you put some in the microwave, I'll have it in a bit."

"Okay." He turned for the door.

She pulled the blanket a little closer.

Will stopped with his hand on the door, and watched Kerene. He sighed softly, and lingered beside the swing. "Can we talk?"

Kerene shook her head. "Not now."

"Well, I'll talk, and you listen."

"Will," she quickly inhaled. "Please. Just leave me be."

"Do you really want that?"

"Right now? Yeah. I do."

Will shook his head. "I don't know what you're going through."

Kerene looked to the sky.

"I didn't know my parents, they left when I was a kid." He stated. "But I know you're *hurting* . And sometimes it's good to hurt, because it ties you to reality. It keeps us *human,* and alive. Even when we don't want to be alive anymore."

Kerene pressed her knuckles to her lips with a deep inhale.

"But this *hurt,* this *pain,* it's too much." He said softly. "I can help you. Or at least *try.* Just so you don't wake up screaming again."

Will had been brought out of his sleep to Kerene screaming twice, and only to come to her bedroom to find she was safe but victim to her night terrors. They'd progressed, and it showed how raw of a wound had been carved into her soul.

Tears fell from her eyes, her bottom lip quivering, trying to hold in as much as she could.

"If I can't carry some of the weight you have, then what's the point of having me around? I *need* to be there for you." He stared at the swing as his nervousness came bleeding out. "I- I

want to be there for you, like you were for me every day I woke up from a nightmare. Every day I saw something horrible. Instead of throwing me to the wolves, you kept me around. You showed me a kindness no one ever has. I want to help you, Kerene. Let me help you."

Kerene let out a gasp, sobbing into her hands.

Will, as best as he could, wedged in beside her to offer some form of comfort. He hesitated to put his hand on her back, to pat her, soothe her, and it was a kindness he *could* offer that would allow Kerene to flourish.

With her exhausted state, she'd fallen asleep after having a bowl of soup. The dogs, practically service dogs, huddled around her bed in a heap to aid her emotions. Will stood in the doorway, overlooking the sight of this wonderful being wrapped in everything that was once his. She'd taken it and made it all hers, not for one second would he steal it back.

This woman gave him a new life, and he would try to keep her head above water to do the same.

Will didn't know if he could call it tip-toeing, but they'd very much avoided the subject of the funeral and anything about the occasional mental breakdowns in the day.

Kerene grew more irritable at things, mainly inanimate, and very particular about things being in their areas.

Kerene couldn't find her house keys one day, ripping the house to shreds for it. She cursed like a sailor, the dogs running past Will to safety.

Will appeared in the doorway of the living room to her rummaging through the cushions. "What're you looking for?"

"My *fucking* keys." She growled. "I put them in the same spot every night. I don't put them anywhere else. The one time I'm running late, and I actually *fucking* need it. It's nowhere to be seen." She looked at the time. "I don't even care anymore. I'm done."

"Alright. Maybe calm down, we'll find them, okay?"

"Don't tell me to calm down." She growled.

He put his hand out, "You're at an eight right now. Bring it down to a two."

"Don't." Kerene pointed at him accusingly.

"Did you take your medication today?" Will put his hands on his hips like a stern parent.

"I don't need more *pills,* I need my *keys*."

“Did you or did you not take your medication today?”

Kerene shut her eyes tightly as she rubbed her temples.

Will approached her. “Come on, sit down.”

“I’m going to be late for work.”

“Sit down.”

“Will, move it-”

“Sit down!” He screamed.

She flinched back.

“I’m sorry.” He put his hands out, but didn’t touch her. “I’m sorry. Okay? I’m sorry. *Please,* sit down.”

Kerene watched him carefully, and gently sat down on the couch. Her eyes never leaving Will, and now Will felt horribly guilty. He ran a hand down his face, falling heavily beside her. He leaned on his knees while Kerene sat with her hands in her lap.

“You need *help,* Kerene.” He stated. “You’re not taking your medication, you’re skipping meals; you’re *declining* . You won’t even talk to me anymore.” He looked at her for a brief moment before fiddling with his glasses in his breast pocket. “You get better. I get better.”

Kerene stared at the side of his face.

Will met her eyes. “Isn’t that what we agreed on?”

Kerene looked to his hands, and the way they twitched. She inhaled softly through her nose, and exhaled the same.

“They recruited a psychiatrist to help me with some of the cases we’ve come across.” Will stated, “Dr. Lecter has been helping me with the nightmares.”

Kerene glanced between his eyes, “When were you going to tell me?”

“It didn’t seem right.”

She nodded slowly.

“He can help you. Like he’s helping me.”

“I don’t do shrinks.”

“He’s not a shrink.”

“He’s a *psychiatrist* .”

“Give him a chance.” Will said. “And if he doesn’t relieve some of the pain, we’ll go to group therapy. Like we used to.”

Kerene looked to his hands again.

“Promise me you’ll take your meds.”

“When I find them.”

He furrowed his brow, “How do you lose your medication?”

“ *Casper* .”

Will hung his head in defeat, “That dog needs a dog house outside.”

“I keep telling you.” She stood up.

Will followed, standing before her. “He took my other pair of glasses, you know. Hid them. Under the couch. He thinks it’s a game.”

“That’s unfortunate when you need glasses to find your glasses.”

“Ha. Ha. Funny.” Will clasped his glasses consciously to make sure they were still in his breast pocket.

Kerene leaned down to see her orange medication bottle hidden under the arm chair and groaned. “Get that dog a kennel.” She pointed to the hallway full of dogs leading to the kitchen. Casper, among the bunch, was happy as a clam at high water.

“I’ll deal with him.” Will insisted and pointed. “Medication. Now.” He fetched the spare keys from the jewelry box on the mantle. “Make sure to return these, these are *my* spares. The keys you had *were* spares. Stop losing them.”

“Whatever.” She pocketed the bottle.

They’d shared a taxi down to work, and Kerene walked into the restaurant late. She was flocked almost instantly.

“You’re late.” Called the manager, noticing her crossing the floor past busy tables. “Can I speak to you?”

Kerene sighed, following him aside. “I couldn’t find my keys this morning, and by the time I got my spares, it was already late. I apologize-“

“This isn’t the first time you’ve been late Kerene. I can’t take apologies anymore.”

She stepped back. “So what’re you saying?”

“I can’t let you slide along and not let anyone else do the same.”

Kerene scoffed.

“I’m putting you on a suspension period.”

She shook her head, “And here I thought I came all this way to do something.”

“I like you, you’re a good worker, and you care about your job. That’s more than anyone does here, and I value that. But you have to straighten up, and keep your head above water.”

“Straighten up? I’ve been through Hell and back these past weeks and you want to talk about *keeping my head above water?”* She began to rise back up in volume.

Her manager put his hands up to calm her, much like Will would. If it wasn’t Will doing it, it angered her more somehow.

“I had to bury my own *father* because he killed himself, and *I* had to arrange his funeral because there is no one left to do it.”

Her manager stared at her, “I didn’t know. I’m terribly sorry for your loss. That’s a heavy thing to do.”

Kerene shook her head, stepping away. “Call me when you need me back.” She took her leave and didn’t look over her shoulder.

She felt like she was fuming, burning up, and she couldn’t put a top on it. Her medication wouldn’t kick in until the next hour or so, until then she couldn’t find an in between level. She knew she had to eat and she had to get some water into her system. By the time she’d stopped by a deli market and grabbed a sandwich, it was nearing lunch.

Kerene has no other idea than to visit the lecture hall.

After much deception, she’d been given a visitor’s pass and direction to where Will was. She’d never been in the building. As she approached the room where Will was teaching, she could hear his voice. As a teacher, he had a strong and reaching voice. At the farm house, he was small and hidden. She liked these parts of him no one could see.

Kerene entered the front hall, coming into sight as the projector screen turned photos. She was appalled by the mutilated body on display, and grimaced.

Maybe it was best she didn’t see this, considering its ability to fuel nightmares.

Will hadn’t caught sight of Kerene yet, his back to the class, looking at the evidence photos thrown up by the projector. “The Chesapeake Ripper is credited for over a dozen murders in the past decade, but these past two years, he remains dormant. His signature work is to mutilate his victims almost identically, and to take a surgical trophy from each victim. The last victim was missing his liver.” He finally turned. “What he’s doing with these trophies, we don’t know yet.” Will’s eyes met Kerene’s. He furrowed his brow at her, looking at her visitor’s pass, and back to the class. “Why don’t we all take a break for lunch on that thought?”

The class began to pack up and step past Kerene. They glanced at her but paid no mind.

Will rounded his desk, setting his glasses down, hands on his hips - he was in parent mode, which was a rarity these days. “What’re you doing here?”

She approached, “I was late to work today. So they suspended me.”

Will softened, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I told him about the funeral and all that, and practically told him to go sit on a stick.”

“Did you?”

“I wanted to.”

Will scoffed, suppressing his smirk. “So you came by?”

“It is lunch time.” She swayed.

He nodded. “I’m not really in the eating mood.” He sat down.

“I see.” She pointed to the picture up on the screen. “After seeing that.”

He moved to grab the projector remote to turn the forgotten thing off, “You shouldn’t have to see that.”

“Neither should you.”

He sighed, looking up at her.

Someone behind them cleared their throat, and the two turned. A handsomely dressed gentleman stood before them, jacket over his forearm, hands clasped into a fist gently. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“No.” Will stood.

“I was in the area having a friend for lunch, and thought I’d drop by to see how things were.” He smiled softly.

Kerene eyed him, pulling her defenses back up. Her intuition bell gave off a horrible ring.

“I guess you could say I’m flattered then.” Will rounded the desk. “This is Dr. Lecter.” He gestured from Kerene to Lecter.

Dr. Lecter came from the doorway to stand before the two, and he came to a slow stop. His smile diminishing to something of admiration, making him look menacing in the dim lighting. He towered over Kerene even at a distance.

“Dr. Lecter, this is my roommate, *Kerene* .”

His eyes twinkled, but were as dead as the void of space. “I’ve heard many good things about you, I feel as if I already have met you. But I never got your name.”

“I would hope so.” Kerene said wryly.

Will cleared his throat.

“Only the best, I can assure you.”

Kerene smiled dryly, and turned to Will.

“How do you spell that?” Lecter asked.

“Like *Serene,* but with a *K.”*

He hummed, never turning his attention away from her. “If I’m correct, it means *light.”*

“I wouldn’t know.”

Will looked to Kerene’s raring expression to become insulting. He cleared his throat again, gaining Lecter’s attention. “It’s a good thing you’re here.” He gestured to Kerene, “We were looking around for someone who can help Kerene.”

“Is that so?” He looked to Kerene again, “What sort of help are you looking for?”

“Actually,” Kerene said, “I’m good.”

Will furrowed his brow at her.

“There’s no shame in asking for help.” Dr. Lecter stated.

“There’s no need for help when there’s nothing to patch.” She stepped around him, “If you would excuse us, we were leaving for lunch. I’m afraid you did come at a bad time, Dr. Lecter. *Will.”* She gestured back as she took for the door.

Will glanced between the two, grabbing his jacket. “Would you excuse me?”

Dr. Lecter gestured forward calmly, “I’ll be seeing you.”

Will nodded.

Dr. Lecter watched Will, and just like a dog, he tucked tail and followed beside her. Having seen Kerene, he was baffled on how beautiful she was. How powerful she was regardless of flaws, and how broken a person could be. He’d met Will, and Will was hardly put together, but *Kerene* - she was a puzzle and a half.

There was no mistake about it. She was alive and well.

When Will caught up to Kerene, she’d given her visitor’s pass back. He approached her as she pushed open the front doors to the building. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“ *That,* what you said to Dr. Lecter.”

“That guy gives me the creeps.”

“Believe me, I didn’t trust him at first either, but I learned it was better to tell someone about how I was feeling than bottling it inside.”

She stared, “Why couldn’t you tell *me* about how you’re feeling?”

He sighed, “Because I don’t want you to carry what I’m going through.”

“That’s bullshit. You can carry my weight, but I can’t carry yours.” She shook her head walking off.

“There are things I don’t want you to worry about.”

“Like what? That you’re seeing mutilated bodies and dead things? I don’t want you seeing that stuff either.”

“The job has to get done.”

“Not this way.” She pointed. “I don’t want help if it’s going to come from a guy like Dr. Lecter. What the hell kind of name is that anyways?”

Will followed her down the sidewalk.

They’d had lunch together, regardless of Will’s appetite and Kerene having just eaten. They’d walked back together, and for the time remaining - Kerene stayed in town. Wandering around the business avenue like a tourist, eyeing the stores yet not going into a single one.

She couldn’t help but think of what person Dr. Lecter could be, with a name as exotic as that. With a smile as sinister as his own, she feared his intentions, whether good or not.

Will and Kerene hitched a taxi back home after his lectures, and the dogs ran about as dinner was being made; warm oven roasted chicken breasts, cauliflower rice, and mixed vegetables.

It was an attempt at a “normal dinner”, mocked Kerene.

While munching on the pieces of stray cauliflower, Kerene watched the back of Will’s head.

“Can I ask you a question?” She asked.

Will paused, “Sure?” He stirred the rice.

“That case you were talking about, during the lecture, what is it?”

Will lingered on the question, “The Chesapeake Ripper.”

“A ripper. How scary.” She wiggled her fingers in his face.

He scoffed with a smirk but it diminished, “The FBI has been searching for him for years, and they said they locked him up. There’s someone sitting in jail right now, for two years, and he states he’s the ripper.”

“And Will Graham doesn’t believe so?”

“I know so.” He stated. “The power of persuasion is strong. Someone could’ve easily suggested he was the ripper, and pounded it into his head until he believed he was.”

“Isn’t that inhumane?”

“It’s corruption.”

“Who would think to do that?”

“The one who locked him in his cell.” He said, turning off the stove. “Ever since then, the attacks stopped.”

“Isn’t that *good* ?”

“He’s not the killer.”

“But the murders stopped.”

“I know.” He mumbled. “But he’s not the ripper. The *real* ripper is still out there. We just need to flush him out of hiding.”

“Flush him out of hiding? You mean, make him kill again? Isn’t *that* unethical?”

“The team is driving with that idea.”

“ *Team* ? You have a team now.” She poked fun. “What does that make you?”

“Their dancing monkey.”

Kerene rolled her eyes, “You’re no one's monkey.”

“That’s assuring. Still makes me the dancing monkey, willing to perform for anyone.” He said in a seething tone.

“Relax. I won’t let anyone get to you.” She insisted. “They’ll get a real bear down if they think they’re getting a chunk of Will Graham.”

“Maybe *chunk* isn’t the word we’re looking for, considering we’re speaking of said ripper.”

“Sorry.” She patted his arm briefly, stepping around him.

They’d sat down, dogs getting a whiff of the chicken, sitting at their feet, and they enjoyed what they could of the meal. Breaking pieces of chicken for each of the dogs, they were offered a moment of peace before the world would come kicking in their door.

They didn’t say a word more about the case, or the ripper, or even about Dr. Lecter, despite Kerene’s curiosity.

When Will exited the bathroom from brushing his teeth, and Kerene swapped places, she stood in the doorway.

“Do you think in a few months, when this is all over and we have enough money, we’ll move?”

Will lingered in the doorway of his dark bedroom, “Where would we go?”

She shrugged, “This place doesn’t feel like home anymore. The more I think about it, it’s brought me more bad than good. Despite being born in Virginia.”

Will paused, “I don’t know, I mean.. It has its days, but I can’t leave this place. It’s my home, my property, my *job* is here.”

“You can find any job along the coast on fishing boats and shipyards.”

“I thought about that once. Think about it sometimes actually.” He fiddled with his thumbs. “I don’t think I’m ready to leave this place yet, it feels like there’s still something I need to learn here before going on.”

Kerene nodded in defeat, stuffing her toothbrush back in her mouth turning for the bathroom.

Will now wanted to persist and find out the reason to her comment. Sure, she’d gone through hell and maybe a new set of scenery would make things better but they could always make things worse. Not knowing where she was, what town they were in, how much longer they’d stay until moving to the next.

Will had to find the ripper and put a stop to it all. That was his quest, whether he’d die trying or succeed. He couldn’t leave Wolf's Trap.

Not yet.

Chapter End Notes

Coy Kerene. Intrigued Hannibal. Golden retriever Will. Always a good trio.

Reluctance.

Chapter Notes

> Aye! It's been a while since I updated! I think I'm going to change the update times to one update a month, and every 3rd of the month. It makes it so much easier. Besides, I've been busy with other stories on the loose and others. :) Without further interruption, enjoy and take care. :)
>
> Just going to drop a few chapters to make up for the months I was absent on this story. :) Don't mind me.

Days had passed.

Will and Kerene waltzed around each with their usual routine . They'd never spoke about the murder cases again, though it trickled at the forefront of Kerene's mind. She wanted to know more, to see more, but she didn't know if she would be able to recover from that trauma.

She already had enough on her plate, she couldn't go back again.

Kerene had a busy day already at work; two events strolled through the restaurant, and she was carrying the weight of another worker who had gone home sick. She just barely missed the phone call from Will.

She excused herself, folding her apron shuffling into the quiet bathroom. "Hey, what's up?"

" *I wanted to tell you before anything."*

"Tell me what?"

"They picked up another case. I'm heading out to Trenton."

"Trenton? New Jersey?"

" *I'll be back in the morning."*

"I would hope so." She paused, "Do you need me to pick you up from the airport?"

" *No. I think we're going to drive up there. I don't really know what Crawford has in mind, but we'll be on the road in an hour or so."*

"Not even a hug goodbye then." She joked.

" *Maybe tomorrow."*

“Maybe tomorrow.” She hummed.

“ *I gotta go. They’re going to bring me by the house. I have to pack.”*

“I’ll take the dogs out when I get home so you don’t have to.”

“ *Okay.”*

“Okay.”

Will sighed.

“Will *?”*

“Yeah?”

“If you have a bad night, don’t be afraid to call me?”

“With no hesitation,”

Kerene smiled. “See you tomorrow.”

“ *See you.”*

The phone went dead, and for a moment she caught a glimpse of Will’s face hiding from behind his extended hand. A photo she’d taken when they were just strangers, and they’d danced around each other like lovers.

Lovers were difficult.

Friends was easier.

Kerene got back out onto the floor before she could get caught, and her shift ended soon after.

Candi, the busy bee, was off to meet her girlfriend’s parents in Maine. She wouldn’t be back for a few days, so the car was Kerene’s. Candi was just glad to have gotten the car back in one piece last time, the full gas tank rule was forgotten about but brushed off.

Kerene got into the car, and began navigating through town so she could get back home. Will should be on his way out to New Jersey, maybe even at the state border already.

Kerene came to a stop at a red light, and watched the traffic pass her by.

She looked down at her phone for a brief moment, texting Will to see if he’d gotten to New Jersey safely. The car horn blared behind her, she jolted up, quickly pulling away from the green light.

She pulled over to the side of the road where traffic was a little less bothersome, and stray lamp posts lit the way. She’d put her hazards on just in case some blind asshole came zooming down the road.

Kerene's phone gave a beep, and she smiled at the text message from Will; " *We just signed into the hotel, and we'll be here for another ten before taking off to the scene. "*

She could sense his restlessness, tonight would be a horrible night. She text him back; " *don't be afraid to call me. "*

A car pulled up behind Kerene's, headlights shining into her rear view mirror.

She looked up. Heart racing. Throat dried up. She locked the doors.

The man had gotten out of his car, and at a short distance, standing beside her window. "Are you okay?"

Kerene's eyes met the man's, the side of his face illuminated by his headlights, the other side submerged in darkness. She cracked her window open a bit, "I'm fine." She flashed her phone at him to suggest she was busy texting.

With quick eyes, he caught the contact ID on the screen, *Will.*

"Oh." He said, a tone of recognition. "You are Will Graham's friend."

"And you would be Dr. Lecter." She said wryly, "What a surprise to see you again."

"A surprise indeed. *Kerene* ? It is *Kerene,* isn't it?"

"My birth certificate says so."

He hummed, "And how are you?"

"You know," she paused, " *This* and *that* . The usual."

He nodded. He glanced both ways down the road, "Are you headed home?"

"No, actually. I'm going to meet with a friend for dinner." She lied. "I just told him I'm going to be there in four minutes. So I should go."

He stared at her, words hidden behind his eyes. Did he know what she was doing? How clever she really was? He smiled. "I won't hold you."

Kerene pulled the car into drive.

"You know," he started back up. "I don't mean to intrude on your life, but I offer many coping skills as well as a helpful ear to listen. If you should need it. I'll give you my card." He dug into his wallet, picking out one of his wonderfully designed cards, and held the corner of it through the window. "If you should lose this, I'm sure Will could help you find me as well."

Kerene stared at the gold letter on the card, *Dr. Hannibal Lecter* sitting in a calligraphic font . She took it, having not spared it another look.

“It was good seeing you. I hope to meet with you again.” He smiled.

Kerene put the card aside, “Touchè.” She drove off from the side of the road, looking into her rear view mirror.

Hannibal’s figure against his headlights looked menacing. If she could, she would wipe that smug look off of his face. As much as Will promoted him, Kerene had a horrible feeling about him alone. Even in a car where she had full control of protecting herself, she felt like he was towering over her.

Hannibal’s personality felt uninviting, a trap waiting to happen, and she couldn’t let herself be drawn into it all. She wanted Will out of there but he saw no danger, only a “helpful ear to listen”.

She wouldn’t tell Will about this encounter. He was withholding secrets from her, and she could do the same.

When Will came back, it looked like he’d seen God’s true form and came down from Heaven traumatized.

The rain wouldn’t stop falling from the sky either.

Kerene agreed to pick Will up from work and bring him to Baltimore, Maryland where Dr. Lecter had invited him for dinner.

“All I’m saying is.. Isn’t it a little strange for your psychiatrist to invite you to dinner?” Kerene asked.

“Technically, he’s not my psychiatrist.” Will waved his finger as they departed from the lecture hall. "He's a co-worker."

“Right. He just sits with you for an hour, unpaid, and you enjoy each other’s time.” She paused, “Do you *like* Dr. Lecter?”

“What?”

“Like - *like* like?”

“No. not *like* like, not even consider it.” Will went flustered, “No. I do not have any sort of attraction to Hannibal, alright? It’s a professional relationship.”

“So, it is a *relationship* though, right?” She picked fun.

Will glared at her, getting into the car. “Forget it.”

She smirked, starting up the car, and pulling away from the curb. “All I’m saying is that maybe, just maybe, this guy is a little too,” she trailed off, “Off his rocker?”

“That’s insane to even consider.”

“One percent is still a possibility.” She mumbled.

Will shook his head. “He said you’re invited too.”

Kerene looked over, “You’re serious?”

“He said a friend of mine is a friend of his.”

She scoffed. “I’m not walking into some stranger’s house for dinner.”

“He’s not a stranger.”

“I get it, you’re comfortable with him, I’m not. He gives me this horrible vibe, and I don’t like it. I’m not staying.”

“Kerene. *Please.* For my sanity, and in kindness, come to dinner.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

An hour drive later they stood on the doorstep to Hannibal’s home, he opened the door extending it behind him. “Welcome, please, do come in. Make yourselves at home.” He greeted.

Will walked in first, and Kerene lingered on the doorstep. She stared at Hannibal, Hannibal gestured in.

“I can assure you, Miss Kerene. I don’t bite.”

She passed him, “I do.” She said under her breath.

He smirked staring at the space she’d occupied, and shut the door behind them. He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry if the kitchen is overwhelming, I’m still in the process of finishing up.”

“That’s alright. It’s your home.” Will said, “You can do what you please.”

Hannibal and Will stepped into the kitchen.

Kerene’s eyes devoured the foyer, and the delectable taste of Dr. Lecter. He was a Victorian styled man, a gentleman who never left the 1900’s.

“What *is* for dinner?”

Hannibal smiled as Kerene stepped into the doorway, and looked down to his cutting board. “ *Ris de veau ,* they call it *sweetbread* . But it is nothing but beef with mushroom sauce.”

“Not to pop anyone’s bubble, but will there be a substitute meal?” Kerene asked.

Hannibal and Will furrowed their brow at her.

“Allergy.”

“Ah.” Hannibal hummed. “I’m sure I could find something for you.” He smiled.

Kerene wasn’t allergic to mushrooms, she just didn’t want to eat cow innards. She didn’t know much French but she knew the word *veau* anywhere. *Cow Pancreas.* She could vomit to the smell of it if she got close enough.

“I don’t also mean to be rude, but.. I think I’ll take the substitute as well.” Will said.

Hannibal raised his brow.

“It smells amazing. It does. But I’ve been kind of sick since I came back.”

“No worries.” Hannibal smiled softly, “More for me.”

Kerene met his glance, and she turned to look at the rest of the hallway behind her.

When they had been seated at the dinner table - Hannibal at the head, Kerene to his left, Will to his right -, he’d poured them each a glass of label-less wine.

“How long have you been a psychiatrist?” Kerene asked as he loomed over her glass.

“Quite a while.”

“Why psychiatry?”

“I was tired of the ER work, and thought to instead pick the minds of unique individuals.”

“You mean people with disorders and disabilities?”

He paused, “Yes.”

Kerene looked to Will, and Will furrowed his brow. She rolled her eyes, staring at the salad before her. “So, you were a doctor before this?”

“ *Surgeon* , yes.”

“Why quit?”

He sat down, unbuttoning his suit to be comfortable. “I lost a life.”

“In a hands-on medical field, I would assume that happens sometimes.”

“Once is more than enough to change fields.” He insisted.

She gave a passionless hum.

“Why the sudden interest?” He glanced at Will and back.

“Will insists I become hospitable to strangers.”

Kerene looked at Will.

Will held a firm stare, as if to say *behave yourself.*

“Hospitality is a trait learned among the empathetic.” Hannibal stated.

“So is insensibility towards opinions apparently.”

Hannibal glanced between the two with hard glares. Kerene was playfully angry, Will was furious.

“They wouldn’t have to be insensible if *others* would trust their word.” Will stated.

“Trust has to be reciprocated. That’s the only way a relationship works.” Kerene insisted.

Will laughed wryly, “As if you would know what that is.”

“Touché.”

Hannibal cleared his throat, “Maybe we ought to talk about this some other time?”

Kerene turned her attention to Hannibal, “I’ll drop it if he does.”

Will blew up tight like a balloon, “I’m not dropping *this. You* apologize first for calling me insensible.”

“You apologize first for dragging me with you.”

“And here I thought I was doing *you* a favor.” He threw his arms up.

“Favor? The act of a *favor* is to return, in kindness, an equal or greater deed.”

“I get better. You get better.”

The phrase made her stop.

Hannibal glanced between the two, cutting his meat in silence, quite amused by the show. He took a sip of his wine after the two had settled in, staring at their plates, and groveling over the moment. He wiped his mouth, “Is it always like this?”

Will met his eyes.

Kerene finally raised the glass of wine to her lips, “It’s as functional as it gets.” She grimaced to the taste of wine.

Hannibal caught the discomfort. “Is something wrong?”

“Pairing *Shiraz* with salad is horrible.”

“I’m impressed. You have a fantastic pallet.”

“Thanks. I’m a recovering alcoholic.”

The statement, mid-gulp, made Will spit back into his glass. He coughed into his elbow and held his hand up to assure he was okay.

Kerene smirked as Will gained his composure. He cleared his throat, taking a deep breath, trying not to show he was already forgiving.

Dinner had gone along smoothly, or as smooth as it gets, with no further intrusion into Hannibal’s personal life. Both Will and Kerene had apparently said their piece. Hannibal walked them to the door.

“It was a pleasure having you two over for dinner.” He insisted.

“Don’t be so humble.” Kerene commented. “It’s not a likeable trait.”

“Apparently so.” Hannibal mumbled. “Do you mind if I speak with you, alone?” He looked to Will. “I won’t hold up more than a minute of your time.”

Kerene looked to Will, and Will held his hand out for the car keys. Exchanging the keys, Will glanced to Hannibal. “I’ll see you around.”

“Tomorrow. 7pm.” Hannibal gestured.

“7pm.” He turned for the car.

Hannibal stood in the doorway of his home, Kerene on the porch, and she met his gaze. “You are a very interesting person, Kerene. Much like Will, you have a gift.”

“And what’s that?”

“Will is a true empath.” He stated, “You *do* share similar empathetic abilities, but you are hardened by your past. I would like to speak with you in a more professional setting.”

“I don’t do shrinks.”

“Then dinner.”

“That’s not very professional.”

“I guess we will have to make due.”

Kerene paused, glancing back to Will in the idling car. “I should go.”

Hannibal nodded, “It was a pleasure to have you over for dinner. I hope to share another meal. Next time I’ll have a better side for you.”

Kerene stepped down from the porch and onto the sidewalk, “Later.”

Hannibal waved to her, and to Will who looked through the rear view mirror. Will raised his hand to wave. Hannibal watched them until the car had vanished before shutting the door behind himself. With a smile on his face, he took to cleaning up the mess, saving his leftovers in the fridge.

When the pair had gotten home, they got ready for bed, but lingered in their rooms with tension. When Will went down for a glass of water, Kerene was already leaning against the counter with a cup of tea in hand.

They shared a look.

Will pulled a cup from the cabinet beside her, filling his glass, and very slowly leaned back against the counter beside her.

Kerene clasped her cup, staring at the steam coming from it. “I’m sorry.”

“For?”

“For calling you insensible, and not seeing things through your eyes.”

“I don’t expect you to always understand me.” He mumbled at his cup. “But I should’ve told you everything. I thought I was sparing you the hurt, but I was only being selfish.”

“So was I.”

They looked at each other.

“We have to stop fighting if we want to live.”

Will scoffed, “The only way I see it is if we make a pact to kill each other to end our misery.”

Kerene chuckled, “I don’t think Hannibal would like your coping mechanism.”

He shook his head, “I think he knows how dysfunctional we are as a pair now.”

Kerene hummed. “He finds it amusing.”

“How do you know?”

“I have a strong feeling about it.”

“And about him?”

Kerene sighed, “I don’t want to trust him. It’s not because I feel discomfort towards him, *I do,* but..”

“It’s hard to trust people you don’t know.”

Kerene looked up at him.

“I *know* . I still have that feeling sometimes.” He scoffed, “I was practically born with *that* feeling.”

Kerene sighed.

Will gently nudged her shoulder with his. “Give it a try. Just once. If you don’t like it, like I said, we’ll go back to group therapy. We will *try* to find something that works.”

Kerene nodded, Will nudged her again.

The tone was set for the night; forgiveness strived through them because they had no other way to cope. It was either together, or nothing at all. There was no life beyond the pair.

Or so they assumed.

The Appointment.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy. :) The chapter kind of dips into a sad tone for a bit, but you'll understand.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kerene dreaded appointments, especially surrounding herself. She'd kept her head down for a few days but it was seemingly no use. Will would persist.

Kerene's foot tapped while sitting in the waiting room.

The door opened at seven o'clock, and another patient walked out. Kerene stood up.

Hannibal's eyes met Kerene's, as she shoved her hands in her jacket pockets. "Kerene. It's a pleasure to see you again. But I wasn't expecting you."

"I know." She said.

He turned to the lingering patient. "I'll see you Wednesday."

The patient walked off, glancing back to Kerene and the doctor.

Hannibal gestured in, "Please, come in."

Kerene walked around him and into the office. "Am I taking up someone else's time?"

"No. That was my last patient."

Her eyes, much like his home, devoured every detail in the room. "Do you always decorate as if you're some long lost time traveler?" She scoffed.

"Not always." He joked. "I've always admired the time period when finer things were a necessity."

"I believe the time period you're looking for is when France overthrew their government and the higher class were beheaded."

Hannibal scoffed. "Would you like to sit?" He gestured to the chairs across from each other.

Kerene eyed them. "I'll stand." She leaned against the desk.

Hannibal watched her, hands in his own pockets. "If you don't mind me asking, what is it that you fear most about *shrinks?"*

She averted her eyes, shrugging one shoulder. “They’re strangers trusted with the darkest secrets of a person’s life. They can do anything to manipulate them. The only thing that stops them is morality, it’s just that some choose not to.”

“Is that what you believe?”

“It’s what I know.”

Hannibal nodded, “It’s true that we have the ability to control others, but so does every John and Jane Doe.”

“Shrinks have licenses to do it. They’re professional manipulators.”

Hannibal sat in one of the chairs, making Kerene stand above him. She would be the one to choose to see eye to eye with Hannibal, or to remain on another level from him. “Does this feeling come from the inability to find a support group?”

Kerene turned to the desk, picking up the letter cutter, setting it into the cup instead rearranging the tabletop.

Hannibal’s eyes flickered to the movement of her hands.

“Does Will spend a lot of time here?” She asked, rounding the desk.

“It’s against confidentiality to speak about another patient.”

“Even for a friend?” Kerene pressed her hands into the office chair, standing behind the desk.

“It’s against patient confidentiality. I apologize.”

Kerene looked to the books on the second level.

“You seem distracted.” Hannibal stated. “Please. Sit.”

“I don’t sit still well.”

“How come?”

“Medication.”

“Do you take medication for the trauma?”

“Does taking medication normally equal trauma?” She stated. “Does *Will* tell you I have trauma?”

“From my own observations, you’re very good at creating distractions and keeping at a distance from others. You have severe mistrust, and *yet* attach yourself to a character like Will. A true empath who in turn is emotionally damaged as well. You are quick to choose anger as a defensive mechanism, and have trouble sleeping.”

Kerene turned away, “I don’t like being psychoanalyzed.”

“You share that in common with Will.” He commented as he stood, seeing that she wouldn’t stoop down. “But why else would you have come here?”

“Will says I should seek help. I get better, he gets better. That’s our number one rule.” She mumbled.

“You say it with much distaste.” Hannibal neared, but kept his distance.

Kerene glanced to his shoes, “It seems like there isn’t room for both of us to improve. When one of us is content, the other is deep in shit.”

“You feel there is no in-between?”

“I *know* there’s no in-between.” She stared at the elk statue against the wall, nearing it carefully.

Hannibal’s eyes drifted to the bronze statue and back to Kerene’s dry expression. “You seem sure about many things.”

Kerene stepped away from the statue and Hannibal again, lingering around the chairs. “I have to be sure.”

“How so?”

“Sometimes it can save a life.” She sat on the arm of one of the chairs, finally coming back to center.

“Your own life or others?”

Kerene paused, “My own.”

Hannibal nodded, standing before her. “Sometimes all we can do is save ourselves. After all, if our minds become clouded by negativity and deceit, we leave our bodies vulnerable to attacks life may hurl at us.”

“Is that your philosophy? Is that why you do all this?”

“Part of my job is to help others.”

“What’s the other part?”

“To show them their true colors.”

Will and Kerene kept quiet that night, both busy with a side dish or main dish for dinner. But quiet.

Will looked over his shoulder. “Hey.”

Kerene turned.

“Are you doing okay?”

“Yeah? Why wouldn’t I be?”

Will hummed, “Normally you have some comment to make about me by this time. Or you ask if I fell asleep in class today.”

“I’ve just got a lot on my mind.”

“Like what?”

“ *Stuff.”*

“Stuff.” Will hummed. “Sounds *fun.”*

Kerene wanted to tell him about the “therapy” session, how her day went, how she barely made it through the front door of his office. It was just them talking in a room full of old artifacts, hopeless things and then silence. She’d never expected to say more than *hello.* “How *was* work? Did that *Crawford* guy come around again?”

“Not today, but I have a feeling he will.”

“Why do you say that?”

“When we were in New Jersey, I told him a piece of my mind.” He said, tension and annoyance in his voice.

“About what?”

“The jobs he keeps giving me. How overworked I am.”

“If you can’t do it anymore, you can quit.”

“That’s what he told me.” He looked to Kerene, “He told me to quit.”

“So you should.”

Will kept quiet.

“Right?”

Will watched her, “Right.”

“Okay then. So this will be a new slate for you. No more nightmares, no more sleeping during lectures, it’ll help.”

But some part of Will said he wasn’t given the option to quit, that saving lives was more important than saving his own. He’d lost a few innocent people along the way, *yes* , but he was saving people who would *become* victims. He was saving little girls who were going to be plucked out of the crowd, and abandoned dead on the side of the road.

He couldn’t stop.

He wouldn’t.

But he wouldn’t tell Kerene. It would break her heart.

The next time Kerene had gone to see Hannibal, they’d changed the scene of the office and instead they were collecting things for Hannibal’s shopping list just a walking distance from it.

“How was work?” Hannibal asked, pushing the cart along.

“ *Usual* . One nasty customer, and the rest follow in.” Kerene plucked at some packaging along the aisle absently.

“And how are you?”

“I’m okay.”

“Just okay?”

She didn’t want to tell him about the night terrors she had to do with Will’s case. She saw the image over and over of the girl’s bodies, and she couldn’t help but think there was a serial killer on the loose just sitting idle.

“Will had some trouble sleeping.” She said instead.

They crept through the international aisle. “Do you normally help him when he has trouble falling asleep?”

“And when he has night terrors.”

“It’s comforting to know that he’ll always have you around when he can’t help himself. You act as an anchor for him.”

She wanted to state it was exhausting, but kept that thought away.

“You feel a great responsibility towards Will.” He stated, turning the labels to a few bottles, reading them, and deciding to take some.

“Of course. He’s my friend.”

“Would you help someone else who was your friend or does Will have *special* privileges?”

“I don’t have other friends, and that might sound pitiful but I like it that way. Just me, Will, the dogs, and the house. That’s it. No other worries.”

“Do you feel overwhelmed with that much responsibility?”

“Sometimes.” They came to the end cap.

“And taking care of Will when you yourself are not in your right mindset, that doesn’t overwhelm you?” He looked her in the eyes.

Kerene paused a moment too long, and Hannibal nodded before turning away into the fresh produce section.

“You have a good heart and head on your shoulders, but you’re driven entirely by your heart. It’s a dangerous way to go about.”

“Is that so?” She began to retreat from him.

“In a cruel world where an unruly *tyrant* is our creator, both healer and murderer of his own children, leading by the heart is like setting yourself up to become a martyr, a *sheep* .”

Kerene was quiet for too long behind him, so he turned to see she had been following. Her eyes met his.

“ *And behold, I send you out as sheep among the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”*

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means to be shrewd and quick, but to be attentive and kind.”

“Sounds like bull shit to me.” She snipped, walking around his cart.

Hannibal smirked, and turned down the aisle with her.

They moved through the fresh produce aisles, and Hannibal collected some herbs and mushrooms. He looked over to Kerene standing in the aisle of fruits, she was off in her own world wondering if she should get something for Will to take to work. In the distance, Hannibal admired her. She smelt like sugar scrub and fresh mint leaves, the restaurant scent lingering on her, having been in the kitchen to replace one of the chefs for two hours.

He smiled as she collected a few Gala apples, disregarding the scale beside her. When she turned to come back to his side, Hannibal wasn’t shy to admit he was watching her.

Kerene didn't meet his eyes.

They moved to the checkout line, and Kerene went ahead.

"What're you going to make with all this stuff?" She asked absently.

"I had my mind on making *pasta alla puttanesca* ."

"What's that?"

"A traditional dish served best with a glass of red *Nero D'Avola."* He smiled. "Care to join me?"

She hesitated, "I should get back to Will after this."

He nodded, "Next time then?"

She didn't answer him.

They walked along the streets back to Hannibal's office where he went straight to his trunk to put his groceries away. Kerene lingered on the sidewalk, the bag of apples in both hands in front of her.

"You sure you'll be leaving now? Dinner won't be long." Hannibal closed his trunk.

"Yeah. I should call Will, he probably already started cooking dinner."

"Well, I won't hold you here then." He smiled, "It was a pleasure to see you again. No matter how untraditional our evening to the shop was."

She nodded, "See you."

"Have a good night Kerene."

Turning away towards the car, she glanced back to Hannibal going up the stairs to close up his office.

"I don't think taking care of Will is overwhelming, by the way." She muttered.

Hannibal turned in the doorway, "I never said it was."

"Good." She nodded, and unlocked the car doors. "Good night." Getting into the car, she paused for a moment to process her words, and shook her head. " *Idiot* ."

She felt the need to confirm her insecurities, that she needed to boldly state she wasn't exhausted from propping Will up when in fact - she was. But no one, not even Lecter, needed to know that truth. It's something she would bury, a secret she would keep away from Will himself. She didn't want word to leak out, for Will to think of himself as a burden, he already had too much on his plate.

Now that he was going to quit doing all the special agent stuff - he would be safe from the clutches of his own mind. The darkest corner would remain lit. He could sleep at night.

Or so Kerene thought.

On the hour-long drive back towards Wolf Trap, the roads were dark and, for a humid August night, a little windy. Turning on the high beams, Kerene stared at something in the middle of the road. *Two* some-things. She stopped the car, parked, and stared for a good minute before rushing to unlock the car doors.

A man, and his dog. The fur coat was all too familiar.

" *Casper?"* She called.

The dog following stopped, tail began to wag rapidly to her voice - Casper rushed up.

She reached down, clutching his collar, and looked up. "Will?"

The lone body kept walking ahead.

"Will!" She yelled.

Will, standing in nothing but his boxers and tee shirt barefoot, began to slowly turn to the call. He wasn't in his right mind, he wasn't even awake. His eyes were open but he was asleep.

"Will!" She yelled again.

Like floating from the deepest depth of the ocean, the light from the surface of the waves shining down at him, he came up for air softly. He blinked a few times before shivering, coming to consciousness with what he was doing, and where he was standing.

"Will?" Kerene called.

Will put his hand up to the light, shading them and squinted. "Kerene?"

"What are you doing out here?"

Will looked around. "I.. I don't know."

Kerene held the wile Casper who began to get anxious. "Do you even know where you are?"

He shivered against the breeze again, and held himself. He noticed Casper in her hold on the middle of the road. All coming to him as the seconds passed.

Kerene got him into the passenger's seat carefully, and they drove the fifteen minutes back to the farm house. Kerene helped Will inside, the dogs more than happy to see him again in the night, and she sat him down at the kitchen table with a blanket.

Kerene stood with her back against the counter after getting him a cup of coffee, her nail against her tooth, biting down tightly. Her gaze didn't break from watching Will, afraid that if she closed her eyes - he would vanish.

She dropped her hand, and sighed noisily.

Will rubbed his eyes again, clasping his coffee cup.

"What were you doing out on the road, Will?"

"I told you." He said in annoyance, "I was asleep."

"You've never done this before. You don't have a history of sleepwalking. Do you?"

"No." He said quietly.

She shook her head lightly, "It's not even midnight."

"You weren't home, okay? I didn't know where you were. You didn't tell me. I got anxious. So, I skipped dinner until you would get home. I went to bed."

" *Will* ." She sighed, pausing for a long moment. "What's happening at work?"

He went quiet.

"You can tell me these things. There isn't anything you can't tell me."

"There's a lot I can't."

"Why?"

"Because you don't need to hear about the killings, and the.. The mutilations. The victims, none of that." He began to stamper, becoming irritable at himself.

"But if you did, and nothing happens to me, I can help you."

"Apparently not." He gestured to the door.

Kerene was more hurt by that statement than anything, she nodded puckering her lips. "I know I can't be there every waking second. But at the end of the day, I am *here* . The only reason I stay.. Is because I care about what happens to you. It is not in your power to control how *I* feel, because regardless - when I wake you up from another nightmare, or another episode, or in the middle of the *god damn* road, it breaks my heart." Her bottom lip quivered, eyes tearing up, and it made Will want to hide. "It breaks my heart to lose you *every time* . To lose a friend."

Will clenched his jaw, staring at his coffee.

"I buried *everyone* . I won't bury you too." She wiped her eyes, turning her back to him with hands on the counter. She quickly looked into the fridge sniffling.

Will drowned out the sounds of her putting together a sandwich with the last of their deli meat and cheese, setting it in front of him. He opened his eyes when she ran a hand through his hair, brushing it aside to one side of his forehead. He looked up at her with his sad, doe eyes. Kerene smiled pitifully, and leaned down to kiss his forehead. Her hand strayed on the back of his head a moment before she stepped down the hall . Casper, among the dogs, only followed her.

Will watched her go, sitting quietly in the kitchen, at the table alone with his pathetic sandwich. He felt just as pathetic, to say something so horrible. He didn't want to eat, didn't want to be in her presence anymore, to trouble her.

He felt horrible.

He wouldn't verbalize how he felt, couldn't even go down the same hallway where she slept just across the hall from him. He lingered in front of her door, cracked open just a bit, but he didn't bother. He turned for his bedroom where he would remain wide awake, forcing himself to stay up.

Will didn't want to risk falling back asleep, to sleepwalk again, and to be found by someone other than Kerene.

Kerene didn't want to fall asleep in fear that Will would leave the house, that he'll sleepwalk to town, or somewhere unknown. She didn't want to be caught off guard.

Neither wanting to be a burden to each other but inevitably both draining the energy of the other. When one was just about empty on hope, the other had obtained it. With a constant need to help the other, neither cared for themselves.

A truly, horrible *demise* .

Chapter End Notes

Funny note: I saw someone with a "Wise as serpents, calm as doves" tattoo and thought it was pretty neat. :)

The Ripper.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September came in with a storm and cold weather.

The clouds never seemed to let up.

Kerene had a new habit of waking up in the a.m., and instead of forcing herself to get back to sleep, she'd jog down the road to town and back.

Will had fewer, but worse night terrors. Sometimes Kerene was gone during the terrors, and Will would wake up alone in the house, only to care for himself. He wouldn't tell her when she entered the room.

They walked eggshells around each other.

There was a recognizable silence between the two.

"Do you have an appointment with Dr. Lecter tonight?" Kerene asked.

"Yeah." Will said over collecting his paperwork together, regardless of the holiday.

"Do you think you could pick up what we need from the market by his office?" She asked.

"Sure."

Kerene watched him move hastily.

"See you." Will called.

"See you at dinner."

The door closed behind him, and the dogs returned back to Kerene.

She didn't have work today, didn't have anything to do but to mope around the house. She looked to all the awaiting dogs at her feet, and sighed heavily. "Let's get to work then, huh?"

The dogs' tails began to wag.

She started first with the kitchen; throwing out old food, cleaning the fridge, the countertops, the stove top, and the dishes remaining in the sink. She moved to the living room; fixing the

blanket on the armchair, organizing the books, vacuuming the rugs, dusting the tables. She let the dogs out in between chores, and let them back in while moving to her bedroom.

She glanced to Will's closed bedroom door.

Kerene turned away.

She organized her bookshelf, brought down her laundry to wash, changed her sheets, and cleaned those too.

Kerene didn't know what time had passed but she moved outside while the clouds rolled over, the wind subtle but pushing the chime on the porch as she swept. Autumn was upon them, but the leaves falling were early.

The dogs ran out over the lawn, the porch, and some even dared sit on the dirt road leading up.

Kerene listened to music as she pulled weeds from the small garden out front, and the remaining flowers were still attempting to stay alive. Casper walked over as she crouched, sniffing out what she was doing, and looked up at her.

"What's up, *Cassie?"* She hummed, "Hm? You helping?" She scratched his head, and he lingered a moment more before taking off.

Kerene kept at kneeling, pulling aside the weeds.

She didn't notice the car pulling up to the home, the dogs scurrying for the porch to safety from the clutches of a stranger. All but Casper, who stood on the steps like a guard dog.

The stranger approached Kerene, calling out to her but the music was louder behind her humming.

Casper snapped his jaw at the air between him and the stranger, too intimidated to approach.

Kerene looked up from pulling weeds, and noticed Casper's hair standing up. She caught sight of the figure in the corner of her eye, and whipped around.

"Jesus Christ!" She planted firmly into the dirt.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." Hannibal insisted, hands out to assist her.

She collected herself, peeling her earbuds out, and listened to Casper growling and barking. She whistled, and the dog cocked his head aside in silence. Kerene looked up at Hannibal, "What're you doing here?" She asked, standing up, and dusting her hands free of dirt.

"I was hoping to speak with Will."

"He's not here."

Hannibal furrowed his brow.

“He’s at a lecture. He won’t be back until three.”

“Oh.” He hummed, looking across the empty land behind him and to the dogs.

“You can catch him there for lunch.” She started up the stairs.

“Thank you.” Hannibal said, watching her let in the dogs.

“Come on, Cassie.” Kerene called.

Casper, still on the steps, watched Hannibal.

“Come on.”

The dog moved from the steps.

Hannibal eyed the dog and smiled at Kerene. “How are you?”

“Could always be better.” She leaned against the banister, standing over him.

“Have you had any problems?”

“Not that I know of.”

Hannibal nodded, “You seem stand-off-ish.”

“I just didn’t expect you to do a home visit for Will.”

“My apologies. I should have called ahead.”

She nodded slowly, and looked to his car. “Like I said, you could catch Will for lunch. But I don’t know if he’ll be much of a talker.”

“How come?”

“Maybe he’s different with you, but he won’t tell me anything anymore.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Of course.”

Hannibal nodded, “Just between you and I, I believe Will hasn’t been sleeping well. Has he been experiencing long episodes of sleep cycles?”

“He doesn’t tell me anything, but I don’t think he’s been sleeping.” She paused, “Two weeks ago, when I came back from Baltimore, I found him in the street sleepwalking. He walked a good distance from home.”

“That’s peculiar.”

“Peculiar?”

“Cases of sleepwalking are prominent in children, but not subjective to adults, but it is very rare.”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“I had no idea.”

“Looks like we’re both in the dark then.”

Hannibal nodded, “Has he been falling asleep in places other than home?”

“School. He says he falls asleep between lectures.” She stated, “It started after he came back from New Jersey. That Crawford guy told him to quit, and he said he would.”

“But he didn’t.”

“I figured that much.”

“Has he had any more night terrors?”

“Not that I know of. In the mornings, when I wake up, I go on jogs.”

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Maybe a week, a few days or so?” She said.

“And when did Will begin to withdraw?”

“I don’t know. A while. Longer than I realized, when I think about it.”

Hannibal nodded, “I’ll speak with him about his sleepwalking, and his withdrawals.”

“He’ll know I talked to you.”

“Let’s keep it between us then. We know nothing about this conversation.” He smiled.

Kerene swayed, looking back to the road, and hearing one of the dogs whine - most likely Casper.

“Besides trying to care for Will’s well-being, have you been taking care of yourself?”

“Define *care* .”

“I’ll take it as a *no.”*

“I’ve got a lot on my plate-“

“Most in which you are not obligated to hold.”

She paused. “I’m managing.”

“Poorly.”

She furrowed her brow defensively.

“If you don’t mind me saying-“

“I do.”

He smiled, “I apologize for overstepping.”

Kerene took a breath. “If I need help, I know where to find you.”

Hannibal bowed his head, “I’ll take my leave then.”

Kerene watched him get into his car, and with a small wave, he backed up and pulled down the road. She felt a sudden relief.

Maybe it was because their “spot” had been Hannibal’s office and not the sanctuary she called home. She didn’t want to share this place with anyone just yet, not without Will’s consent. She assumed that Hannibal had met with Will for lunch, and again for their appointment later through the day because Kerene didn’t see Will until late.

She was sat in the living room, dogs all around, when Will walked in. “Hey.” She said, lowering the book in her lap.

Will’s eyes panned the room first, then glanced to her in his chair. “Hi.”

“How was your day?”

“It was okay.” He lowered his briefcase and jacket into the armchair.

“And your lecture?”

“Graphic, as usual.”

She nodded, and sighed. “If you’re hungry, I put away leftovers for you. I didn’t know if you were going to come for dinner, so I put it away.”

He moved for the kitchen.

“Will?”

He hummed.

“Can we talk?”

“What’s there to talk about?”

“A lot.” She scoffed.

“I’ve had a long day. I’d like to just go to bed.”

“And I’d like to stop walking on egg shells around you.”

“No one told you to.” He said defensively.

She sighed longingly, setting her book aside, and gestured to the chair across from her. “Please.”

“I’m tired-”

“So am I.” She gestured again.

He rolled his eyes slowly as he crossed the room, and sat across from her. Even his posture was defensive, arms over his chest tightly, eyes darting elsewhere.

Kerene rolled her shoulders, and pulled the knitted blanket tighter around herself. “Can we act like friends right now?”

“We are friends.”

“It feels like I’m an ulcer you keep trying to cut out of your life.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Kerene puckered her lips and nodded. “Okay.” She said softly.

Will saw the defeat in her eyes and deflated.

“You know, I’ve been trying to cope.” She began picking at the blanket ends, “I don’t really turn to anyone, because I’m not ready to tell anyone about what happened. And you know.. that sucks. It *really* does. Because I can see someone on the side of the road who needs help, and I can help them. But I consciously doubt myself, and I find myself not being able to trust even the nicest people. I can’t.. Talk to strangers because it makes me feel uncomfortable. I consciously know it’s because of.. The *past,* and yet I’m still afraid.”

She met Will’s doe eyes.

“I can’t just admit that to anyone.” Kerene’s eyes fell to his vest, “Just say you don’t trust me anymore-”

“I do.” He said faintly.

“Then say it.”

He met her eyes in a longing gaze, “I trust you. There was never a moment when I never had doubt in you.”

“Then why do I feel like you’re pulling away?”

“Because I don’t trust myself around you.” He quickly began to recoil from his words, wringing his hands together nervously. “Every time we get closer together, I always manage

to do something that upsets you, or.. Or harms you. *Emotionally* . I know you're trying to take care of me, but I don't want you to. I want *you* to take care of *you* , and I don't want you to get lost along the way because you tried to follow me into the dark places I find myself in." He gasped softly after vomiting every thought.

He'd been too caught up to realize that Kerene had moved from the chair to kneel in front of him, her hands gently hanging onto his own tangled, shaking mess. He stared at her soft knuckles.

"I know you would never intentionally mean to hurt me. You don't have the heart to ever be unkind. Defensive, maybe. And maybe even a little stubborn." She smiled.

Will snorted through his nose.

"But your heart is made of gold. Valuable, and yet at it's thinnest parts - it can be broken off. You can't wear yourself down, Will. I'm here, whether you accept my help or not. We're two broken pieces of society working together. I think the world put us together for a reason."

This time, Will softly smiled back, she patted his hands briefly.

"Eat and then sleep." She insisted, standing up as some of the dogs did as well.

They knew the words *sleep* and *bed* well.

"I'll get to bed in a bit."

"Don't stay up too late." She turned for her bedroom, "Good night."

"Good night." Will called after her.

Casper was the only dog to stay behind, sitting across from Will, gazing up at him. Did he know what Will was thinking? That he wouldn't go to sleep, and he'd keep his three day streak going?

Casper whined at Will, and Will reached out scratching his head.

"Let's go eat dinner." Will said softly.

Casper followed happily, and stuck by Will's side as he ate and went to his bedroom. He looked to the open door across from his, and peeked at the dogs both on the floor and bed. Kerene nestled among them soundlessly.

He returned to his bedroom, Casper in the doorway, and kept his eyes peeled open as he worked hard on his classwork.

Will figured in the next few days that they should invest in an actual car, instead of taxi rides and borrowing their whole-hearted friend's car for the time she was away. A car from a dealership would be too much of an expense, and a car from someone off the side of the street was iffy.

"To be honest, I think Candi would just give us her car if we asked." Kerene said, sitting sideways on the armchair with Will's laptop in hand looking through car ads. "We probably drove it further than she ever has." She leaned her head back, looking at Will sitting across the room. He lowered his newspaper, looking at the ads there like an old grandpa.

"And what would she have when she's down here?" He asked.

"I'm sure her girlfriend has a car."

"It doesn't make sense to have two cars if you live in the same apartment." He mumbled, raising the paper again.

"Will we share a car?"

He lowered the newspaper, "Why? Do you want to have your own?"

"I mean, if we think about it, we'd be picking each other up when the other has the car." She said, "And who's name would it be under?"

He paused, "We can be co-drivers."

"I don't think that's the correct term."

"Primary driver," he pointed to himself, "Secondary driver." He pointed to her.

"That's not fair." She looked back to the laptop. "I have a better driving record than you."

"You don't even have a record. Do you have your license?"

"It's expired last year."

"My point proven." He gestured.

"Still a better record than two speeding tickets." She sang.

Will chucked the pillow from behind him her way, and the dogs scattered like ants.

It hit Kerene in the back of the head.

"Ow." Kerene turned, "You're an ass." She joked.

"Good. Now give it back."

"You want it back?" She began to taunt as she put the laptop down and stood up, "You want your pillow back?"

Will put his hand up to deflect the eventual pillow smack he'd acquire, "Yes. *Politely* ." He began to smile and chuckle as she feigned throws.

"I'll be polite." She teased.

He put both arms up to shield himself from her repetitive smacking, and his chest felt light as Kerene laughed. She hadn't laughed in a while.

Will's phone rang on the coffee table, and Kerene stopped to look at it. Will's eyes turned to it, his laughing coming to a mumble as he reached over. His face fell to seriousness, he looked up at Kerene standing with the pillow still in hand. He cleared his throat, pressing the phone to his ear. "Hello?"

Kerene put the pillow on her armchair.

"Yeah. Alright." He stood up, folding his newspaper. He looked to Kerene, and ducked his head going down the hall.

Kerene knew he would have to leave, he would miss dinner, and she would be alone for another night. She leaned into the hallway, Casper following her along, sitting at her feet. She reached down to pet him, and they watched Will by the back door.

The phone call ended, and Will stared down at it a moment, facing the backyard before turning. He paused when he saw Kerene at the end of the hallway.

"Was that Crawford?" She asked.

"Yeah."

"You have to go?"

"Yeah."

She nodded softly as he passed her, petting Casper's head.

"I should be back after dinner."

"I'll leave your food in the fridge."

He stared into her eyes, and she knew all of his lies. He nodded, and grabbed his jacket and boots.

"Will?"

He turned in the doorway. "Hm?"

"Don't bring home anymore demons this time." She stated. "We've got enough to battle."

"Promise." He scoffed, and walked out the door.

They came to pick him up in the next ten minutes and he was gone.

Gone from Kerene's life, and she was the stay-at-home therapist once again. Damned to the lonely corner of the world. With the afternoon to herself, she didn't know what else to do.

Casper pulled anxiously on his leash.

"You said he is an Alentejo?" Hannibal asked as they walked through the brush of trees.

"He appears to be." She pulled back on the leash, and Casper stayed persistent to want to run after every moving thing he saw. From bird, to leaf, to squirrel.

"And all the dogs you and Will share, they're adopted?"

"In a sense." She said, "Will finds them on the road, and wherever and whatever condition they're in, he gives them the home they deserve."

Hannibal couldn't help but offer his hand out to Kerene's struggling, "May I?"

"It's fine."

"I'll hold him for a bit then. After all, this is quite the walk." He insisted.

Kerene glanced to his downcast hand, and offered the leash out. The moment she didn't feel the pull of Casper on her hands, she felt strange. She pocketed her hands.

Hannibal kept a firm grip on the leash, seemingly weightless. "So, tell me, how have you been?"

"Since your house call?"

"Again, I apologize for catching you off guard."

She hummed, kicking up rocks.

Casper glanced back at her, happily wagging his tail, and continuing along in front of them.

"I've been better." She sighed. "But Will finally spoke to me."

"Why the sudden change?"

"I told him how I felt."

"Which is?"

"That I felt he was pushing me away. And that I had lost his trust somewhere along the way."

"Did you?"

“No. He was sure of that.”

Hannibal nodded.

“He said it wasn’t me he didn’t trust, that it was himself. He said he couldn’t trust himself around me, because he was afraid he might hurt me.”

“Physically?”

“No. He would never.” She stated.

Hannibal stared on.

“He didn’t want to hurt me emotionally. He wanted me to leave him be, and to help myself.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“I have a feeling you will anyways.”

Hannibal smirked, and took a breath. “Do you believe you’re unworthy of help?”

“Everyone can be helped.”

“But do you believe you can be?”

She walked quietly beside him, stumbling over words in her head, trying to get them out, but just moving in silence.

“You see, as children we develop cognition. We learn to reason, and begin to adapt to how our parents care for us. If our parents are kind and loving, we express what is called a *secure attachment.* If they reject us, and only aid us for moments at a time, we become *avoidant.* And for those who receive punishment for needing the basic care as an infant, we develop a *resistant attachment* .”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“The way our parents treat us as children change how we develop as adults. You may be unable to make friends, or can focus solely on work, or confide in one person because you weren’t shown the proper care as a child.”

“So, you’re saying it’s my father’s fault?”

“Not entirely.”

She scoffed, “First you show up to my house uninvited, then you spit on my dead dad’s name. *Nice* .” She took back the leash.

Casper looked back to the sudden slack on his leash.

“Your father passed?” Hannibal frowned as he paused on the trail. “I didn’t mean to spit on his name, it was only an observation of previous patients. I’m so very sorry.”

“I am too.” Her tone changed back to neutrality as she looked back at him, “I won’t forgive you for that.” She stated.

“I understand.”

They continued to walk along, side by side, Casper ahead of them until they came out over a bridge where they walked in a single file. Casper wouldn’t move from the solid ground to the bridge.

“Come on, Cassie.” Kerene called. “It’s okay. It’s a short bridge.” She crouched down, “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Casper looked at the two standing on the bridge, refusing to move.

“Come on.” She whistled. “You wanna go home?”

He cocked his head aside.

Hannibal looked down at Kerene kneeling before her dog, and up to the fearful Alentejo.

“This way. Let’s go home.” She pulled the leash backward, and the dog didn’t move. She sighed in defeat.

“I don’t think he’s keen on the idea of bridges.”

“I figured that much.”

“If you carried him across, then he’d expect the treatment every time.”

“Me? Carry that dog?” She looked up at him, “The dog that eats out of the garbage can and will literally devour his bowl in five minutes?”

“I’ll do it.”

“He really doesn’t like being picked up.” Kerene warned as Hannibal passed her, “Will tried to pick him up once, and he has a bite scar on his arm to show for it.”

As easily as picking up a pup, Hannibal scooped Casper into his arms, and Casper didn’t show any signs of discomfort or distrust. He sat naturally against Hannibal’s chest.

Kerene stood puzzled before him.

“Shall we?”

Kerene walked ahead as Hannibal followed with Casper in his arms, and once they’d gotten to the other side, Hannibal set him down.

Casper, even then, didn’t think to attack Hannibal.

“How did you do that?” Kerene pointed.

“I’ve managed a few unruly dogs in my life before.” He stated.

“Will got *hurt* last time he even moved towards Casper to pick him up.”

“Like I said, I’m experienced with feral dogs.”

“Apparently.”

“Shall we?” He stepped ahead, and Casper began their trot.

Kerene remained shocked, and it would be something she’d have to tell Will.

When she would eventually tell Will that she’d been seeing Hannibal for “meetings”. If she said she was seeking help, he’d make everything about her and ask her non-stop about it. She didn’t want to be the center of attention.

As Hannibal began to drive Kerene back to the farmhouse, her phone rang, Will’s photo on screen.

Hannibal glanced over to her phone.

She answered, “Hello?”

Hannibal stared ahead, hearing the incoherent mumble on the other end.

“Wait, Will, slow down. Is everything okay?”

Hannibal turned his head in concern.

Kerene glanced over, a horrible sadness in her eyes. “Will, I’m coming to pick you up. Okay? Tell me where you are.” She hung up, staring at the phone, and looked to Hannibal. “I’m sorry to do this to you, but can you bring me to Will? He’s at the Baltimore Mental Institute.”

“Institute? What’s happened? Did they enroll him?”

“No. No. He’s fine.” She huffed, “He’s not the one in the hospital. Something happened. He was called in for a case, and he said he saw something bad.”

“How bad?”

“Enough to trigger his episodes.”

“What do these episodes include?”

“When Will gets too close to the edge, when he’s exhausted everything in him, he gets defensive and stand off-ish, but he gets really, *really* disoriented.”

“Does he experience these episodes frequently?”

“No.”

“Is it only when he hasn’t slept properly?”

“Most of the time? I’ve only experienced it once with him.” She paused in a seemingly dark place in her head. “It was before Jack Crawford got into his head.”

“Let's hope there’s still time to save him.”

Kerene glanced over to his flat tone, and yet tucked away her thoughts. Why did he sound so bothered by doing this small thing?

Was it that or something else?

They pulled up to the hospital where Will was already pacing outside in a panic. Kerene wouldn’t be surprised if he’d already chewed away every possible nail he could.

She rushed out of the car, Hannibal just lingered behind, looking over the hood. “Will?” She called.

To her voice, he turned.

She opened her arms to him, “Come on, Will, let’s go home.” She didn’t know what state he was in. If he would allow her to hold him or if he would push her away, sometimes he didn’t like physical contact, even when he craved it most. He wanted to be held, but not smothered.

Kerene had juggled the balance of caring enough and yet keeping a distance.

Will stepped forward towards her, and she moved with habit. As if to drape him in a blanket of security, she put an arm around his back, and over his arms.

They moved towards the car.

Will’s eyes met the black shein of Hannibal’s car, and he furrowed his brow in confusion at Hannibal being there. “What’re you doing here?” Will looked down at Kerene. “What is he doing here?”

She felt him pull back.

Kerene was at a loss for words. Would she lie and Hannibal would correct her? Would she confess and say she was seeking help? Would Will be mad they didn’t talk about this?

Hannibal spoke up, “I was in town seeing a client. I bumped into Kerene when she had gotten your call, and she asked if I could bring you home.”

Kerene looked to Hannibal, and he only held Will’s gaze. She got no explanation then.

Will seemed to buy it.

“Come on.” Kerene said softly, as she helped him into the back seat with Casper. She climbed into the front, and the ride back was quiet.

Hannibal was quick and precise, calculated and knowing of what he wanted.

Will was a running mess, head askew, running miles.

Kerene had stopped at a cross road, unknowing of what to do. Of what to say. Where to go.

Casper just enjoyed the ride, nose hanging out of the window.

They'd come up to the farm house and Kerene helped Will out of the car as well. Hannibal stepped out of his car again, looking over the hood.

Will paused, turning to him. "Thank you." He said with downcast eyes.

"Anything for a friend."

Will didn't reply back, he nodded, and Kerene helped him up to the door.

"I'll be there in a minute. I have to speak with Hannibal." Kerene insisted, rubbing Will's back. "Why don't you sit down for a bit?" Turning back to Hannibal, who waited patiently, she crossed her arms over her chest securely. "Thank you."

Hannibal nodded, "Will is a unique person. I'd hate to see him suffer alone."

"We have each other."

Hannibal glanced to the house and back, "Back there, when Will wanted an answer, why did you hesitate?"

"Will would become obsessed with my health so much he'd decline his own." Kerene said, "If I tell him I'm seeking help, he'll forget about himself. I don't want that attention on me."

"You're legally not my patient."

Kerene paused.

"Will is not either." Hannibal said. "So to say that you are seeking help from a psychiatrist is a lie, if that's what you mean. We're just," he paused, feigning to find the word he knew. "Two friends, consoling each other. I happen to be a psychiatrist."

Kerene nodded slowly.

"We'll take care of Will. For the both of us." Hannibal smiled. "Good night."

Kerene stepped back, "Good night."

Hannibal got into his car, and drove down the road.

Kerene turned for the home, and for the rest of the night, she followed Will like the dogs did. When he moved to the living room, she pulled up a chair to watch a movie or read a book. When he moved to get coffee, she shared a cup, and made them dinner.

He wasn't very hungry.

When it was time for bed, and she'd brought out the dogs, Will stood in the doorway to his own accord.

It was like he wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words just yet. Charged with so much trauma, and flooded with images he didn't want to see anymore. But there was no way to get them to go away.

When it came time for Kerene to go to bed, Will refused silently.

She stood in his bedroom doorway, leaning against the frame. Will sat at his desk, staring blankly at his laptop. "I'm going to head to bed."

"Good night." He mumbled.

Kerene lingered, "Are you going to bed?"

Will looked over his shoulder to her, "In a little bit."

"You need sleep, Will." She gently pressed, "You need to let your body rest."

"I'll go to bed in a minute. I just need to.. Finish this." He gestured to the laptop.

Kerene glanced behind her to her bedroom, and from her room she grabbed her pillow. Shutting the door behind her, she entered Will's room.

Will looked over to her crossing the room to his bed, "What're you doing?"

She slipped under his covers, and fixed her pillow behind her. "Going to bed."

Will hesitated, and watched the dogs appear one by one to enter the room. They didn't stray far from the door, just waiting to be accepted in properly.

"I won't pressure you to tell me what happened. But if it makes you feel better-"

"Nothing will make me feel better." He stated. "From what I saw-" He shook his head.

"Will," she called, "Come here." She offered the space beside her in his bed. "Tell me."

Will stared at her, slowly standing, crossing the room to the bed. He sat on the edge of the bed, his back to her, and eyes adrift on some place between there and nowhere.

"What happened? What did you see?" Kerene asked quietly.

He shook his head again a little discomposed, moving to his own slow pace. He furrowed his brow, forcing the images away, but welcoming them as he shut his eyes. "They believe they captured the Chesapeake Ripper two years ago, locked him up in the asylum, and the attacks stopped ever since."

"You told me before."

“He.. I see a ripper, but he’s not the one we’re looking for.”

“The Chesapeake Ripper is still out there then?” She asked. “Why does this bother you? Why did you call me?”

“It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t have to. Just say it.”

He paused, slowly turning his body. “The Ripper got out. And he lied about pains, he was alone with a nurse.”

Kerene’s face contorted in disgust.

“He decimated and disgraced her body. Stabbing *everything* into it. Anything he could get his hands on.”

Kerene couldn’t find any words.

“He’d pressed in her eyes, and squeezed them.” He opened his own eyes, taking a slow breath. “I had to relive in his footsteps to prove it wasn’t him.”

“This gift you have, to *see* . You don’t have to use it anymore. You can say no.”

“And more people die because I don’t use it?”

“Is that what this is about? Is that why you didn’t quit?”

He kept quiet.

“Will. You can’t play God. You can't save everyone. Not even God can save everyone, that’s why he lets them die.”

Will stared into her eyes, knowing the hatred she held for death, especially in loved ones.

“Some people can only go so far to save others before they’re putting themselves in danger. I don’t want you to be the one of those people who slip off the edge, and there’s nothing to grab onto behind you. Let *go.* Let someone else worry about the pain and the anger and grieving.”

Will shook his head.

“You think I can’t understand what you’re going through, I know what it’s like to feel delusional and unstable.” She said. “I’ve lived this last year like that, and I got through because you were there for me. And now I’m here for you. For all of it.” She reached out, clasping his hand.

He stared down at it.

“Put the brakes on, Will. Just for a bit. Just until we can fix you.”

After much persuasion, Will had settled with his head in the pillows, hands folded on his stomach, staring at the ceiling as Kerene went on about work.

“-And of course, I didn’t want to say anything because if I did then I’d be the bad guy. Always am.” Kerene looked over. “Apparently what I say is rude-“ she paused.

Will’s eyes were closed, his breathing even, and he rightfully looked peaceful for the first time in a while. Kerene leaned up on her elbow, watching him, and enjoyed his peace. Carefully crossing the room to turn off the light, she stepped back over the dogs spread around the room and quietly into bed.

She made no sound, carefully not to scare him. She knew now he’d been restless, and maybe even days without sleep. Kerene truly worried about Will, but knowing he was beside her asleep assured her.

Will woke up a little later.

The moon was still up.

He rubbed his eyes roughly, and walked towards the door. The dogs had gone back downstairs, huddling in a pile. All but Casper.

Casper sat in the hallway, and Will paused to stare at the dog.

Casper didn’t utter a noise, just watching him.

Will stepped into the bathroom, flicking on the light, and stood before the mirror. He hung his head down, holding the edge of the sink, before meeting his reflection’s eye. His eyes looked sunken, he looked beaten and bruised, his very soul was worn down. Opening the cabinet, he took an aspirin, and shut it to look back at himself.

His eyes had changed; once full of life and light, and now dull.

He left the bathroom light on.

Returning to his room, he pulled his drawer open. Various colored pens, pencils, and utensils within. Mostly his corrective utensils, along with pencil shavings he needed to clean up. In the far corner of the drawer sat his scissors, a long forgotten thing. He held them tightly in his hand, looking at the bathroom light glisten against the blade.

Kerene shifted in her sleep.

Will’s eyes travelled to the foot of the bed.

Will felt an uncontrollable urge to wake her, to tell her about his longing darkness, and the voices in his head. But what could she do? Hold him? Lie and say that everything was going

to be alright while he spiraled into insanity, and she sat afloat in safety? She mocked him.

She sucked the very life from him, looking at him with such pity when he's at his lowest.

Will crossed the room to her side of the bed. A hair strayed across her cheek, and he leaned forward to brush the curl away.

Kerene's hand furled gently, like a baby in the womb with an unconscious reflex.

Will looked down at the scissors in his hand, and back to Kerene.

He should wake her, tell her everything. Just so she could mock him, laugh at him, and put him in a nuthouse.

Will couldn't have that.

He wouldn't go away.

He would never let anyone put him away.

With a brute force, Will gored into Kerene's ribs, between one of her costals.

She woke with a deep gasp, her hands clasped tightly around Will's, her eyes wide.

Will gave a shattered breath, his focus now bleeding into what he was doing, and he met Kerene's panicked gaze and the blood spewing from her chest.

Kerene frowned, " *Why ?"* She wheezed.

A tear fell from her eye, and Will began to panic.

"They're right." She cried.

Will stared into her lifeless eyes.

"You *are*.. a monster." Kerene's face went slack, her hands limp, and Will pulled away.

He stared at the lifeless body of a friend he once trusted, and he couldn't shake this feeling. He'd done something horribly wrong, he couldn't fix this.

He let the demons get into his head.

Will shut his eyes tightly, taking deep breaths, wishing it would all go away. The words echoed in his ears, and he could feel himself spiraling.

You are a monster.

He ripped his eyes open, and there was no longer darkness.

Will was standing on the front lawn, in his shirt and briefs, the sun rising over the horizon. He stood in confusion as everything came into place.

It was a nightmare.

He was sleep walking again.

Casper sat in front of him, seemingly guarding him. Casper cocked his head aside, and licked his hand again, now while he was awake.

Will looked to his hands, not covered in blood but in Casper's spit. Almost as if he'd known Will was sleep walking, and trying to find a way to wake him. Will gained composure of his legs, and turned back for the house. He didn't want to walk up the stairs to find he'd actually done it, at this point he didn't know what was reality and what was part of his dream.

The dogs watched him pass and returned to their idle, sleepy state.

Carefully, Will followed down the hallway leading up to his bedroom, and stared from the doorway.

Casper sat in the hallway. He didn't utter a noise, just watching him.

Will stood at the foot of the bed, his eyes adjusting to the darkness to find that Kerene - was very much still sleeping peacefully. His scissors still nestled in the drawer.

He rubbed his eyes roughly, sitting on the edge.

Will wouldn't tell Kerene about this, about this horrible nightmare where he *murdered* her. He didn't want to hurt her emotionally, and yet his brain, while exhausted and beyond stretched, offered him another solution. It wasn't a solution, it was a problem.

He needed deep, psychological help.

He was only getting worse.

But he couldn't tell Kerene.

Not yet.

Chapter End Notes

Notice any patterns yet? Any strange commentary? :)

Also, such a raw piece of controversary that I've every written: "You can't play God. You can't save everyone. Not even God can save everyone, that's why he lets them die." Like - excuse me? What is this? :)

God's Plan

Chapter Notes

> Aye! Another month has come, and another chapter is posted! :) Hope you like it. Stay safe and take care. See you next update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Weeks had gone by, and Will hadn't gotten any better. He complained of frequent headaches, and didn't know what to expect anymore as Crawford's lab rat. He'd solved two more cases in the time being, but he was running out of ends to grasp onto.

He'd slept at awkward hours of the day, not knowing if he was awake or not.

Sometimes he woke up in cold sweats, Kerene already having the coffee on for him on bad mornings.

She didn't pry, and he didn't tell.

But they both knew that Will wasn't well.

Kerene turned to Hannibal in these times.

She paced in his office, Hannibal writing away in his book. "I just don't know what to do anymore." She sighed in distraught. "He won't speak to me about his nightmares, he won't even look at me."

"Maybe he has given himself reason not to get closer than he is. In this state, he may be violent or lash out in anger." Hannibal said into the pages of his book. "He can not let regret become his priority."

"But he will never do anything to hurt me."

"Maybe not physically." Hannibal met her eyes finally, "This takes a toll on you emotionally. I see it more and more when you come here."

Kerene shook her head, "It's all I worry about."

"If it is such a concern, why don't you seek medical help for Will?"

"You *are* medical help."

"I mean further."

"You mean, like, a doctor?"

“A neurologist.”

Kerene shook her head, “You think there’s something biologically wrong with Will?”

“There may be a possibility that Will is suffering from an underlying condition.”

“And if there were another possibility?”

“Maybe Will is suffering from a mental illness.”

“He won’t like that.”

“We will have to just see for ourselves then.” Hannibal stood. “I will have to call an old friend to make an appointment. Our paths haven’t crossed in years.”

“Wait.” Kerene put her hand out. “What’re they going to do to Will?”

“Nothing dangerous. They’ll scan his brain for any irregularities, and if anything should appear - we’ll get Will the treatment he needs in order to recover.” Hannibal buttoned his suit back up. “Excuse me.”

Kerene turned away from the desk, and Hannibal left the room to call. Kerene’s eyes followed back to the stag in the corner, and she gazed at it. Probably a hefty thing, solid, and smooth.

When Hannibal returned, Kerene had sat down in one of the chairs. She turned to him.

“You know people from the hospital?”

“I do.” Hannibal sat across from her.

“I would think people who study the mind and people who study the brain are on different wavelengths.”

“I used to be a surgeon.”

“Right. Forgot.” Kerene pointed. “You told me the night you invited Will and I over for dinner.”

“I did.”

“It’s all kind of a blur from then to now.” She scoffed. “I guess that’s how it’s always been.”

Hannibal gazed at Kerene in front of him, and how frailed she’d become. She was still well guarded, and yet exhibited much slack. Months prior she dreaded having dinner with him, and Hannibal was sure that if he’d asked - she would visit him home alone now.

Kerene met his watchful eyes and cleared her throat, standing suddenly to pace again. “So, when will your doctor friend be able to see Will?”

“Whenever Will accepts the help.”

“I think he’d be more than willing to. He just wants the nightmares and the terrors to go away as much as I do.”

“Is that truly what you want?”

She paused, furrowing her brow deeply at him. “Of course. I want Will to be healthy again.”

“I’d hate to be the bringer of insensitive thoughts, but if there is no physical harm being done to Will, then he will need to seek further help in order to cope.”

“I think you’re as far as he’ll go.”

“I’m flattered.” Hannibal stood. “It is up to Will to choose whether he does this test or not.”

“He won’t turn it down.”

“Can you be sure?”

Kerene met his stare. “I know Will. I know he wants help. He just doesn’t want to ask for it.”

“Because he’s fearful of judgement?”

“Because he thinks he believes the lives of others outweigh his own life.”

“So he’s suffering from selflessness. Does that make you selfish for wanting him to cut it out of his life?” Hannibal approached.

“It makes me a good friend for looking out for him.” Kerene stated.

“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.”

“Don’t give me that.” Kerene muttered. “Will can get the help that he needs. We’re going to get to the bottom of this, and I’m going to have a word with this Crawford guy once and for all. I don’t care who he is.”

“Jack Crawford isn’t a man to be easily moved, he’s grounded and territorial.”

“It’s a good thing I don’t care about poking the bear.”

Hannibal smirked.

“I’ll talk with Will about the hospital when I have time.”

“The sooner, the better. We may not have the time we think we do.”

Kerene put her hand out, as if to steady him. “Will is going to be okay.”

Hannibal had his suspicions about Will’s conditions and if he was correct, which he would be, he’ll have to hide this poignant information. Hiding it from Will was easy, but with someone as stubborn and persistent as Kerene - she would prove to be a problem.

It actually took Kerene a fews days to have Will warm up to the idea of going to the health center. They walked the halls of the Noble Hills Health Center in Baltimore. They walked side by side, Kerene holding Will's hand, and Hannibal ahead of them leading the way.

"Everything is going to be okay." Kerene insisted.

Will didn't say a word.

Hannibal came face to face with his old colleague, and they truly were happy to see each other again. "Dr. Sutcliffe and I were residents together at Hopkins." Hannibal stated as they walked towards Dr. Sutcliffe's office.

He welcomed them in, and offered them seats. Kerene remained standing, though Hannibal insisted she'd sit. She paced the back wall, staring at the painting by the door.

"So, Will, when did these symptoms begin? The hallucinations?"

Kerene looked over her shoulder to Will, furrowing her brow.

Hannibal turned his head to her.

Will took a deep breath, "Maybe two or three months."

Kerene stared at Hannibal in distraught.

Hannibal turned back to Dr. Sutcliffe. "There have also been times where you've experienced headaches."

"Yes." Will said quietly.

"And those began just around the same time?" Dr. Sutcliffe asked.

"When Will came back onto the scene, just around the time I met him months ago." Hannibal stated.

"You never told me about the headaches." Kerene stated.

The three in the room paused in their own expressions, Will kept his head tucked down.

"We'll get to the bottom of this." Dr. Sutcliffe smiled, "Don't you worry. We'll run some tests, blood tests, brain scans-"

"What's the standard procedure for brain scans?" Kerene asked.

Hannibal watched her, pushing her way into the forefront again. She stood between the chairs, beside Will like a wolf defending her own.

“Well, we’ll bring Will down to the labs, and take a few blood samples while we’re at it. Then we’ll prepare Will for an MRI.” Dr. Sutcliffe stood. “That *is* what you want?”

Will stood as well, “Yes.”

Dr. Sutcliffe nodded, and rounded the desk. “Then, let’s not waste so much time.” He clasped his hands together, starting back for the door.

Kerene stuck to Will’s side, even as he tried to round the chair away from Kerene.

“You never told me about the headaches.”

“Because it’s not a big deal.”

“Look where we are. It’s a big deal now.” She gestured.

Hannibal leaned over, “Right now wouldn’t be the best time to initiate an argument.” He insisted. “We need Will at his best.” He pat Will’s back as they stepped into the elevator, going down to the MRI and CAT scanning rooms.

They’d given Will a blue paper gown to slip into, and gave him earplugs for the machine. Kerene stood in the room with Hannibal and Dr. Sutcliffe.

“Kerene,” Hannibal stepped aside, “Will looks a little blue in the face.” He glanced to Dr. Sutcliffe. “Would it be trouble if she went in for a moment to calm him?”

Dr. Sutcliffe gestured into the room, “Just a minute.”

Hannibal opened the door for Kerene, and in confusion she stepped into the room.

Will furrowed his brow at her as she approached, “What’re you doing?”

“Hannibal says I should assure your safety.”

“I think I can do that on my own.”

“Just like you can function alone?” She retorted.

He stared.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the hallucinations?” She asked calmly.

“I don’t know.”

“You *do* . You know everything-“

“Well, I do know, I just didn’t want to tell you.”

“Why? Because you didn’t want to worry me?” She scoffed, “If you didn’t realize, I’m standing with you in this mud pit. We’re going together, because it’s *us* or nothing.”

Will looked here and there, nervously fidgeting.

Hannibal and Dr. Sutcliffe speaking privately behind them.

“Maybe you thought it wouldn't worry me, or maybe you thought that if I found out you were seeing things that weren’t there I would send you to a hospital. I know you hate them. *I* hate them too, alright? We’ve both had our fair share of hospitals, and we're not going back into that dark place.” She held his shoulders firmly. “Together, or not at all.” She stated. “Got it?”

He nodded after a moment's worth.

“Come here.” She said softly, pulling him into a hug and holding him tightly. They both shut their eyes.

Hannibal watched the two closely.

“Don’t keep secrets from me anymore. You see things, hear things, you tell me. I can’t read your mind, Will. You gotta tell me if you feel like you’re falling off the edge.” She stroked the back of his head. “I don’t want to wake up one day, and find you gone.”

Pulling away, they stared into each other’s eyes. Kerene held his face firmly.

“We’re ready for the tests now.” Dr. Sutcliffe called from the door. “Whenever you’re finished.” He gestured.

Kerene pat Will’s leg, “It’s going to be okay. We’ll fix this.”

Will nodded, “We’ll get better.”

“We will.” Kerene smiled, stepping through the door and Dr. Sutcliffe drew Will into the machine.

Kerene took a deep breath as she watched Will sitting as still as he could.

“That was very kind of you.” Hannibal said.

“Of what?”

“To anchor Will when he needed it most. You truly are the chain that keeps him from floating off.”

Kerene glanced to Hannibal’s sincere expression, and back to Will.

After a few minutes of waiting, Hannibal had leaned over the computer and the back of Dr. Sutcliffe’s chair. He leaned up.

Dr. Sutcliffe cleared his throat, “This may take a little while.” He looked to Kerene, “Do you know your way around the hospital?”

“No.” Kerene furrowed her brow.

He snapped his finger, “I’ll have to ask my dear friend Hannibal then.” He joked. “Coffee?”

“Sure. Sweetener and milk?”

“You know me well.” Dr. Sutcliffe stated, holding out two dollars.

“Care to join me?” Hannibal asked Kerene.

Kerene looked back to Will. “I should wait-“

“The complete scans shouldn’t be done until another five minutes or so. It’s plenty of time to travel from the cafeteria and back.” Sutcliffe insisted.

Kerene stepped to the door, watching Will. *I’ll be back* , she wanted to call, as if they were home and taking out the dogs.

A nurse entered the room as they exited.

Hannibal walked beside her, “How are you, by the way? I didn’t get to ask.”

“Fine. I guess.”

“Define *fine.”*

“Tired.”

“Emotionally or physically?”

“When am I ever one or the other?” She asked.

Hannibal swayed his head back and forth as if to say, *true.* “I noticed you’re wearing your work shoes. Did you come from work or are you going immediately after this?”

“I’m still debating. Technically I called out, but if they need me - there’s no reason for me to stay home.”

“And if *Will* needs you?”

“The only reason he would need me is if something bad happens.”

“And if something bad *does* happen *?”*

“If there is something wrong with Will, we’ll fix it. Medication, therapy, anything.”

“You’d be willing to risk everything for Will’s better health?”

“He would do the same for me.”

“Would he now?”

Kerene raised an eyebrow at him. “Don’t presume to know the lengths of our relationship. Okay? There may be many things that he has told you, but I know Will, and he is strong enough to get through this. If the roles were reversed, and I was the one losing my mind, he would do everything that I have tried because he *cares* .”

“When it comes to winning a battle, it’s best that *all* participants have the same ideology, so there will be no clashing tones.”

Kerene stood in confusion a moment, “What’re you trying to say?”

“I’m trying to keep you relevant to the options at hand.”

“Which are?” She stopped walking.

Hannibal kept going to the cafeteria, forcing her to move along. “If Will is struggling with a mental disorder, he will have to take more medication and go into further therapy. It may take months to find a coping mechanism that will work. Will proves difficult to change, for better or worse. He’s secure with the ideologies he holds. To Will, change is bad, change only brings negative things. It makes him an immovable object to an inevitable lifetime.”

They entered the cafeteria, walking through the aisles.

“If there is something physiologically wrong with him, it will take both an emotional and physical toll on him. Depending on the outcome, if it *is* a tumor, he will go through the process of surgery and recovery. He may never be the same after. Can you live with that knowledge if this is the outcome?”

“If Will’s personality changes, if this is a tumor, which I highly doubt-“

“On what context?”

“Look, you may be a surgeon, but I don’t think this is a tumor.”

“It represents itself as both characteristics of a tumor as well as a disorder.”

“Well, we’ll find out when we get back upstairs.” Kerene said standing beside the coffee containers, “Can we hurry this up?”

“You can’t rush perfection in making a cup of coffee.” He joked in a light tone. “Here. I’ll make you a cup.”

“I’m fine.”

“I beg to differ.” He insisted as he made two cups of coffee. Holding out one to Kerene, she stared at it and then him. Hannibal smiled, “Here.”

Kerene hesitated to take it, but when she did Hannibal was gone from her side, taking to the registers. She stared at the coffee cup, without asking for it, he was shrewd and witty. Taking a whiff of the coffee, she was silently appreciative.

They followed back up the stairs.

Hannibal knocked on the door before entering.

Dr. Sutcliffe smiled as they approached, Will coming back out of the machine, an assistant helping him. “All done.”

“Any outcome?” Hannibal leaned over the back of his chair.

“Nothing.” They both stared at the screen.

Kerene looked to Will in concern, seemingly very vulnerable.

“No blimps. No malformations or swelling. No evidence of stroke. Nothing.”

Hannibal looked to Kerene’s aloft expression towards Will. She knew Will would be devastated. He pitied her devotion to him.

When Will had changed and came back to the room with them, Dr. Sutcliffe delivered the news, Will was as silently devastated as Kerene to find nothing. Kerene held Will’s arm firmly, to anchor him down and insist he was there at that moment. They promised to take more tests, and do as much as they could.

There was no safe space he could run to in his mind that wasn’t filled with monsters.

He was uncontrollably tethered to this life, and the next to follow.

Hannibal drove them home.

They sat in the back seat in silence.

Hannibal glanced in the rear view mirror to the pair, Will gazed out the window while Kerene occasionally glanced over.

Pulling up to the farmhouse, Hannibal held open Kerene’s door, and Will rounded the back. “Thanks for bringing us home.” Will said.

“I’m sorry there isn’t anything we could surgically do to help you.” Hannibal said. “If this was a tumor, they’d remove it in a heartbeat to have you back to normal.”

Will nodded, eyes astray. “It all seems like a bad joke played by God.”

“God does many unforgivable things.” Hannibal stated.

“Apparently.”

Kerene clasped Will’s back. “Come on.” She glanced back at Hannibal. “Thanks.”

“Good night.” Hannibal smiled.

“Good night.” They said back in unison, and started for the house.

Hannibal drove down the road until his taillights vanished into the darkness.

Kerene let the dogs roam around the backyard, and Will sat at the table. Glancing back to the kitchen, Kerene frowned. She came back in, leaning on the back of the chair across from Will. His head in his hands.

“You hungry? I could make something for you.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“How about coffee? Tea?” She stepped away.

“I don’t want anything. Okay?” He said heavier in tone.

She came back to the chair, “Look, we’ll get through this. Okay? You and I.”

Will shook his head, rubbing his face.

“We’ll start with medication. It’ll help you think straight, and stabilize you-“

“No. No more medication.”

“Will, your sleep schedule is out of whack. You don’t have an appetite, you don’t work out, you don’t drink enough water. You need your head on right.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” He exploded, staring up at her.

Kerene stared at him.

“There’s no amount of medication that’s going to help me. No matter how many hours I spend in front of a psychiatrist, I won’t get better, and I won’t cope. There is nothing for me. *Nothing* .”

Kerene frowned.

“If- if there was a tumor, they would’ve taken it out and everything would’ve been fine. But it’s not. I’m messed up in the head. I see the dead people from these cases in visions and nightmares, and they haunt me. I relive their last dying moments, but I’m also the one in their murderer’s shoes. I *see* them get killed as if I did it. But I *know* I didn’t do it, and yet still feel the weight as if I did.” He began to panic. “And every time I close my eyes, all I see are their faces.” He said softly, tears forming in his eyes. “They could’ve all been saved.”

“You can’t save everyone Will. Not even God can.”

“No. He just lets them die.” He frowned. “Just like I did.”

Kerene came beside him, combing his hair down. “It’s not your fault. None of it is.”

“Then why do I feel so guilty?” He cried, tears falling from his eyes.

Kerene wiped away his tears, and pulled his head into her body. Combing his hair down, she held him close. “This is all just a bad dream. It’ll be over before we know it.”

Will’s hands gently clutched at Kerene’s clothes as he cried.

Kerene kissed the top of his head. “It’ll be five years from now, and we’ll have everything we could possibly need. We won’t have trauma, or worry, or any more nightmares. We’ll be happy.” She insisted. “I promise I won’t let anyone hurt you.” She shut her eyes, rubbing his back. “I care about you.”

Will cried until he’d become exhausted of emotion. He sat silently for a little while before Kerene led him to bed, and despite wanting to fight it, he couldn’t find the strength to. He’d fallen asleep, Kerene not too far, and with this new information of just being *crazy* - he had to accept the truth.

Despite how hurtful.

Sitting in front of his hearth, the fire painted Hannibal in a warm glow. Sat with a glass of red wine, he stared into the flames. With a complacent smile, he watched a small stack of papers burn.

The Noble Hills Health Center results printed on them. Under Will’s name about his Encephalitis.

Hannibal sipped at his red wine, watching as the specks of evidence shriveled away.

He would continue his research, and Dr. Sutcliffe would be a witness. A loose end.

Hannibal would make sure to tie it in the end.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think about Kerene and Hannibal’s interactions? Or Will and Kerene’s? Kerene really is just trying to help her best boy, and it’s precious. Meanwhile, Hannibal.. 👀

Ghouls and Goblins

Chapter Notes

> Aye! It's not on time but it's here. I've been so overwhelmed outside of writing that I haven't gotten much done. The holiday season is a really hard time for me, emotion-wise. But I'm powering through as carefully and safely as I can. Without further wait, here's the update, enjoy and stay safe. :) Try to stay in check with yourself, you matter to a lot of people, even if you don't remember that every second of your day. You matter. Okay?

> Chapter trigger warning: violent depictions of death/murder, mentions of sexual assault, unintentional physical abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As October continued, Will’s medication came in. Every day, he took his Risperdal pill.

He felt a heaviness with taking them; at times he felt worse. Will got light headed, exhausted easily, and at times he had to take breaks during his lectures.

Jack noticed the difference, but he assumed it was better than nightmares.

“Will.” Called Beverly Katz, approaching from the hall.

He turned too quickly, and the room began to spin. He paused, holding himself up with the wall.

“Woah. You alright?”

“Yeah.” He hummed, closing his eyes. “Just moved too fast.”

Beverly furrowed her brow at him, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” He smiled, “What’s up?”

She held up a manila folder, he hadn’t even noticed she was carrying it. “New case.”

He began flipping through the pages as they walked.

“The victim’s name is Ivory Paine. She was on the outskirts of town when she was found dead. She went on a walk, never came back.”

“Why do you need me for this?” He turned to her.

“Jack thinks it might be a unique case.”

“How so?”

She sighed softly, flipping to the last page, a photo clipped to the folder itself. “She was found like this.”

Ivory Paine was no longer anything recognizable. Whoever killed her bashed her head in with something heavy and hard, and didn’t stop until they’d gotten to her brain. Will’s head began to whirl again, and he closed the folder.

“Any leads?”

“Well, they just received her body at the morgue. I know the scene would’ve been better, but we had no other choice. The city wanted it covered. We can’t have another killer on the loose.”

“Another?”

“The Ripper?”

“Right.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” She asked.

“I’m doing better.” He insisted, and that was the truth. “The nightmares have calmed down a lot. I can focus.”

“I’m happy for you.”

Will nodded.

“I’ll let Jack know you’ll be on your way after class?”

Will waved as she took off, and he stepped back into the classroom. A cold breath flushed over the back of his neck, and he whipped around.

There was no one there.

He stared at the door he’d just come through, and insisted it was just the breeze. He turned back for his desk, and lying on top of the desk was the body of Ivory Paine as she’d been found. Her body lying limp, head caved in, the killer standing before him.

Will looked to the killer’s back, and the rock in their hand.

He could smell the musk of the morning dew, the birds chirping quietly, the crickets howling all around.

The killer turned suddenly to Will, as if he’d been caught mid bash, and Will faltered back.

“ *They were right.”*

He was standing over Ivory Paine's body now, bloody rock in his fist, blood splattered on his face, and he was crouched low to stare into the gaping hole in her head. Her jaw, still somewhat intact, moved.

He felt a sense of panic, of regret, and almost apologetic for bashing her brains in.

His actions weren't his own.

"You are a monster."

Under him now lied Kerene, eyes lifeless and cold, the blood from his fist dripping onto her untouched face. She took a gasp of breath to let out a scream, but he held the rock up to silence her.

The grip of death grabbed him.

Will shot up from his desk, looking at the classroom.

"I'm sorry!"

Before him stood Kerene, hands up to steady him. Will collected his breath, as if he were drowning.

"I didn't mean to scare you." She said, "I didn't think I was going to. I'm sorry Will."

"It's okay." He insisted, "It's okay." He gulped, looking around. "What time is it?"

She looked at her phone, "It's five o'clock."

"Five?"

"You must've fallen asleep after class. I tried calling but you didn't answer."

"So you came down here?"

"I was worried."

She sounded genuine and true, and he took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I scared you." He kept averting his eyes.

"I should be the one apologizing." She chuckled, "Are you okay?"

Everyone seemed to ask him that more often now.

"Did you have a nightmare?"

"No." He lied. "Just startled."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He stood up and began packing his things. "How'd you get here?"

“Candi. She dropped me off, we were both off at four thirty.”

He nodded. “That’s nice.”

Kerene stared at Will as he moved slowly, busying himself. “Are the visions going away?”

He paused, “Yeah.”

“And the nightmares?”

He scoffed, “Limited.”

Kerene nodded, “How about your sessions with Hannibal?”

Will glanced at her.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I understand.”

Will sighed, leaning against the desk in front of her. Kerene stepped beside him, shoulders almost brushing.

“I know you’re getting better, or *trying* to. And I’m proud of you for it.”

He scoffed, “Feel like I’m running in place.”

“It’ll get better.” She rubbed his back.

Will nodded. “I can see better. *Function* .”

“That’s good.”

“Sometimes,” he started but drew back.

“What?”

It was too late. He let it slip. He could lie, but she would know.

“What happens sometimes?” She asked again.

He collected himself, thinking to his horrible nightmare not moments ago. “Sometimes the thoughts slip through the cracks. When I’m focusing, and everything is *good* , I still *feel* like I’m losing my mind.”

“The voices and visions will go away eventually.”

“Will they?” He asked.

“Just give it time.” She insisted.

“All I have is time.” He scoffed.

“Because it’s the only thing that we can bet on. It’s one straight line.” She said. “Here to then, whenever *then* is.”

Will met her eyes, full of life and color. He turned away. “I have to go down to the morgue.”

“The morgue?”

“I promised Crawford I’d take a look at a body.” He grabbed the manila folder loosely.

Kerene held a look in her eyes, and Will paused.

“What?”

She shrugged, “Nothing.”

“Was there something else you needed?”

She shook her head, “No. you go. I’ll see you after. I’ll put aside some dinner for you.”

Will nodded, lingering a moment before heading for the door. He didn’t look back.

Kerene dropped her arms to her side, and sighed. She had hoped they would talk further, and she would be able to open up about seeking help. About the incident. She had yet to speak to Hannibal about the scar she avoided staring at or even catching in her peripheral.

Will was the only one who knew about her life, and truly cared for her wellbeing.

It was far too soon to tell for Hannibal.

Will walked down to the morgue just as Jimmy Price was making his last autopsy rounds.

“Will!” He perked up.

The lights in the room bothered Will’s eyes.

“I didn’t think you’d show.”

“I got caught up.”

“Well, glad you could show. Regardless, the bodies aren’t going anywhere.” He joked.

“Just in the ground.”

Jim paused, “Right.”

“Where is Ivory Paine’s body?”

“That would be right here.” He moved over to the table, and ready to pull the covers back, he took a deep breath.

Will's eyes didn't tear from the body before him, and he could feel the cold breath on his neck again. This time he knew no one would be there.

Before him, he could still see Kerene's body, like when he'd stood over her, rock in his hand, and ready to bash her skull in.

Ivory Paine's jaw was somewhat held intact by tissue.

"This is what remains of her at least." Jim stated. "There's no signs of struggle, no traces of the killer's DNA under her nails or indications of sexual assault."

"He didn't want her body." Will stated.

"You know that from just looking at her?" He asked.

Will paused, "He was scared, regretful after he killed her." He opened the file, "That's why there were flowers by her body."

Jim nodded, "So, he kills her, and then feels bad?"

"The killer must have some sort of trauma; the way Ivory Paine was beaten, it was repetitive. He could've stopped once he'd broken her nose, but he didn't. He stopped when there was no recognizable shape to her face."

"Maybe he was trying to make it harder for us to identify the body?"

Will shook his head, "No. He didn't do it on purpose. He did it with reason." But Will didn't know the reason just yet. "They said they found her body on the outskirts of town?"

"Yeah. While we were there, there was nothing around but the park she was at and a new elderly home."

Will nodded. "Does the building have view of the park?"

"I would think so. Why?"

"A home full of elderly, in the morning? Someone must've seen something." He started for the door.

"Wait." Jim called. "You're not going alone, are you?"

Will paused in the door, "No. I'll call." He insisted on a hurry as he took for the door with his phone on speed dial.

"What're we doing here?" Kerene asked.

Will and Kerene stood before the retirement home, having passed the park and trails. Will glanced around. “A local woman was murdered just in that park in the morning. Someone had to have seen something.”

“Oh, great. You brought me to investigate one of your cases?” She said, “Isn’t that somewhat illegal?”

“Come on.”

“Will. I don’t want to do this if you’re going to get in trouble.” She stopped him.

“We’ll be fine, okay?” He opened the front door. “Just follow my lead.”

They walked side by side up to the front desk, and the young woman behind it smiled. “Good afternoon. What can I do for you?”

“I’m with the FBI,” Will uncovered his tag from his jacket, “I’m investigating a local missing person found dead. Ivory Paine.”

She paused, “I heard just a few hours ago.” She frowned, “Poor girl. My heart goes out to her family.”

Kerene frowned as well.

“Is there a way we can speak with some of the guests who may have been awake at the time? Anyone who was out and about?”

“I don’t think I can really do that.” She said. “There are more than forty patients here, and they have their own schedules. Some are sick, some have medical conditions. I don’t want anything to happen, and for you to be liable.”

“We understand. But this may help our investigation to find the person who went after Miss Paine.” Will stated.

“I’ll give you the number to call, from the office. I can’t make the final decision. If I could, I would help you. She didn’t deserve that.”

Will nodded as she slipped over the office’s number and they walked back out the front door.

“That’s it?” Kerene asked.

Will shrugged, “I have to call.” He picked out his phone.

Kerene looked to the nursing home, and to the back fence leading to the garden and resting area. She grabbed Will’s phone-wielding hand and pulled him.

“Hey. Wait.” He followed helplessly. “Kerene.”

She unhinged the gate door, and closed it behind them. Will stared around the courtyard to the elders in wheelchairs, lawn chairs, and slowly moved about. “If you want to find answers

for your questions, start by demanding them." Kerene stated. "What are the questions we're asking?"

Will stared at the side of her face, his chest aching with admiration for her. Kerene looked back at him, and he must've looked dumbfounded.

"Hello?"

"Right." Will snapped back. "Questions. Uh." He scanned the courtyard.

"When time did you wake up this morning?" Kerene asked an elderly woman who loved the color purple too much. Purple track suit, purple socks, purple visor, and purple walking cane.

Kerene and Will sat in amusement across from her.

The older woman paused a moment, "What?"

"When time did you wake up this morning?" Kerene asked again.

"Oh. Maybe around.. eight o'clock?"

"Did you notice anything strange outside your window?" Will asked.

"Strange?" She questioned.

"Any man walking around outside?" Will asked.

"A jogger maybe?" Kerene opted.

"No. No. I don't think I saw anyone outside. No one leaves these walls without the front desk's permission. And the new woman they have there sure is mean, wouldn't even let me go outside to say *hello* to my grandson. He's turning 18 this month. Can you believe it?" She bat her hand at Will.

Will smiled nervously, and Kerene found joy out of his social suffering.

The rest in the courtyard followed in chaos. One old man threatened to beat Will for stepping through his game of shuffleboard, another old woman with Dementia kept forgetting the question. One old man told the two all about his collection of vintage postcards, and old toy cars, even offered to show them.

They declined kindly.

A set of unruly twins argued up a storm, and it reminded Will and Kerene of themselves. But they were obviously both filled with the love for the other, and would use their dry humor and disliked opinions to set the other off.

After talking to nearly the whole courtyard, some began to travel inside. Kerene and Will quickly moved to the garden area, a small hedge leading to a fountain in the middle.

“Someone.. *someone* must have been able to see *something* happening.” Will insisted.

Kerene frowned, “Maybe you won’t find a lead here.”

“I’m sure there’s something here. Something I can work with. Or talk to.” He sat down on the fountain’s edge heavily.

Kerene joined him after a moment’s worth. “I’m sure you’ll find something or someone will come forward.” She patted his back.

Will didn’t interact with her touch; she drew back her hand knowingly. Will was receding into thought.

Standing aside from him, she looked to a small hedge where a pair of elders defying the return rules sat. She took for the two before Will could come to focus.

“Excuse me.” Kerene called.

The two glanced over.

“Hello.” She waved.

“Can I help you?” Asked the older man in his wheelchair.

“I just had a few questions I’d like to ask.”

“Are you a new nurse?” Asked the petite woman. “You know they’re always hiring new ones that come in and out of here.”

“Let the girl ask her question.” Said the man. “Go on.”

Kerene smiled, “You see, I’m with that man over there and he works with the FBI.”

“Oh?” Questioned the woman.

“They’re investigating a murder that happened early this morning. What time would you say you two were to get up?”

The woman thought, “Well, I don’t remember, the sun was already up, I suppose. My nurse, Janet, she would know.” She looked at the other.

The old man was thinking as well.

“Say, don’t you get up pretty early, Jim?” She asked.

“What time did you get up?” Kerene asked.

“Well, I don’t know, maybe eight or so?”

Kerene thought for a moment, “From here, do any of the rooms have sight of the park?” She gestured.

Will was coming to, and noticed Kerene’s absence. He began to grow anxious as he looked about.

“Well, sure.” Said the woman, “Anyone in the east wing has a nice view of the park. Sometimes, without the nurse knowing, I watch the sun rise.” She said softly. “She has me on a set schedule, but boy, I don’t like listening to her.”

Kerene smiled. “Do you both live in the east wing?”

Will walked up on them.

Kerene glanced at him, “Hey.”

“What’re you doing?” He asked.

“I was just asking these two a few questions about the case.”

Will nodded.

“Sometimes I like to watch the people at sun set, but no one comes through here anymore.” Said the woman. “There isn’t much to see. No one comes to visit us much in these parts.”

The old man began to grimace as he held his hand.

Will’s eyes panned to him and his behavior.

“I’m sorry.” Kerene said.

“It’s what happens in these old folk places. We get left here to fend for the rest of our lives.”

The old man’s hand seemed to twitch uncontrollably, an active nerve upsetting him, *arthritis* .

“ *James . Marlene.* Are you still out here?”

Both Will and Kerene looked over in fear of being caught. They looked at each other.

“Time to come in.” Called the nurse at the door.

“I do wish we could talk more.” Said Marlene. “It’s so nice to have company.”

“If anything should come up, we’ll contact you, Miss-?”

“ *Burt.”*

“Miss Burt.” Kerene nodded her head, and said goodbye to the two as they strolled on and passed them.

Kerene and Will snuck back out as quickly as they could.

“What did they say?”

“Well, not much. But the patients in the east wing have a perfect view of the park. That leaves the idea open to *someone* maybe seeing something. Right?”

“I can’t be sure.” Will sighed in frustration. “I have to go there.”

“There?”

He started in the direction of the park.

“Go where?”

“The scene.”

Kerene paused, and yet followed. “Should I be seeing this?”

“They’ve probably cleaned up the site already. There wouldn’t be anything to see.” He ducked under the remaining police tape.

“Will.” She called from the other side.

He turned to see her worrisome expression, and hesitation to proceed further. He nodded, “Stay here. I’ll be back.”

Kerene nodded and watched him move in further towards the murder site. He was in eyesight, but too far from reach. Her stomach churned with the idea that this was something horribly wrong.

Will walked to the center of the crime scene, and he stood in the exact spot Ivory Paine was struck down. He shut his eyes, and took a deep breath.

“It was still dark, the sun was coming over the horizon.”

Will turned abruptly, and the sun had vanished to the west. The glow just appeared between the brush of trees.

“Ivory Paine was on a jog. *Alone* . Distracted.”

Will could hear music in his ears, an upbeat melody keeping him going. There were pieces missing, ones he couldn’t take back with the body being moved from the scene so quickly.

“Someone was in this park with her.”

Will could see a hooded figure walking towards her. He looked to the floor, spotting a cue card that signaled where the damp, blood covered rock was picked up from. He picked up the phantom rock.

“She must’ve stopped. To breathe. To think. To tie her shoe.”

Will approached the phantom Ivory Paine, hunched over to fix her shoelace.

“And she was approached in her time of weakness.”

Ivory Paine looked up at him in fear, and he could see his own reflection in her clear eyes. He smashed the rock against the side of her head but it wasn’t enough. Will was overcome with fear, *what did he just do? His body wasn’t not his own.*

He watched as Ivory Paine squirmed on her stomach, and tried to flee but his hand was quicker. She moved onto her back, to plea for her life, to let out a bloody scream, but he smashed her face in over and *over* and *over* .

Until the noises stopped, until Will was exhausted, and fumbled backward into the tree. Will looked down at his hand, and to the park; someone would find her. Someone would find him.

He began to walk the trail, and tossed the rock along the way.

No one could know the deed he had done.

Kerene, standing behind the police tape, looked back to the trail through the woods and noticed its emptiness. No one passed them the entire time. She drew her attention to Will, and furrowed her brow.

“Will?” She called.

Will was kneeling on the ground, head hung forward, as if he were passed out.

“Will!” She ducked under the tape, hurrying towards Will. As she rounded him, she grappled onto him, holding his shoulders and his face. “Will. Will!” She shook him.

Will jolt awake, eyes wide, clutching too tightly to Kerene’s wrists. He gasped deeply, frantically searching Kerene’s face.

“Hey! *Hey* ! It’s me.” Kerene muttered.

Will could only see droplets of blood on Kerene’s face, his hands still painted red.

Kerene’s eyes panned to his hands holding her, and they *were* red. She grimaced, and looked to the spot where he had been sitting. In the brush of dead leaves and dirt, a bloodied rock sat feet from the scene. “Oh my god.” She began to panic.

Will looked down at the rock too, feeling his head taking another spin.

“Oh my *god* !” Kerene muttered.

Her voice echoed through his head.

Returning back to the scene, a pair of red and blue lights flashed in the distance. Detectives and authority alike returned to the scene as well. Will was standing in a fire pit as he was being skewered for bringing a civilian into the case. Kerene kept ringing her hands, trying to rub the blood away.

Hannibal, who had been called to the scene, wasn't far from her. He approached her carefully, watching her nervous fidgeting. "Are you alright?"

Kerene snapped her head to him, unconscious of her surroundings. "I'm working on it."

Hannibal nodded, and looked to the scene where they were taking new photos. "What you saw today, you should've been sheltered from."

Kerene's mind would only see the blood. "Do you think he meant to find it?"

Hannibal looked down at her, "Will is an extraordinary character. I believe he's capable of many things."

She shook her head, "This is too real."

He nodded, "This is the real world, whether we confront it or not. We can either play oblivious and risk our safety, or we can accept that this world is cruel and unkind."

Kerene stared into his eyes, and turned away to look to Will. Will had downcast eyes, his arms around himself tightly, and yet his hands were fidgeting. He was never good at being scolded without a quick tongue, but this time - he was holding back everything.

When Crawford dismissed him, Will made a b-line for Kerene. She made no attempts to say her goodbye to Hannibal.

When Will came into arm's length, Kerene opened her arms and enveloped him. He stood with open eyes, wanting to hold her but shaking too much. Kerene clenched her eyes shut, holding the back of his head, and tucked her face into his neck.

Hannibal watched Will.

Will looked up at him.

Kerene stepped back, holding Will's face. "No more of this." She shook her head, "You hear me?"

Will pressed his head into her hands, shutting his eyes, and nodded.

Kerene turned to Hannibal, "Could you do me a favor? Could you take Will home?"

"Of course."

Will furrowed his brow.

“Everything is going to be okay. I’ll be home in a bit.” Kerene looked to Crawford in the crowd. “I have to have a chat with someone.”

Will was escorted by Hannibal into his car, and from over his hood - Hannibal watched Kerene make a line for Jack. He smirked, and got inside.

“We’ll talk more after.” Crawford insisted, dismissing the officers before him. He noticed Kerene lingering about.

“Mr. Crawford?”

“Ah, yes. You’re Graham’s roommate? We’ve met.”

“I was wondering,” she said, “if you could not include Will in any future cases.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Will is special.” She said, “I know he has helped you solve cases before, and he’s done remarkable things, but he is fragile. And I don’t want to have to piece him back together at the end of the week anymore if all of this can be avoided.”

“Will Graham is more than capable of opting out-”

“He is, but unless he’s told he can’t do something - he will continue doing it.” She said, “You have to be the one to set him aside and tell him to take time off. Please.” She begged.

Crawford looked to her, and back to Hannibal’s car - still idling aside the crime scene. “Miss..” He trailed off, and she didn’t fill in the blank with her name. “I can assure you that Will is intelligible enough to make his own decisions. He knows his own limits, and if he doesn’t, Dr. Lecter will be sure to set the boundaries for him.”

“He is still recovering.”

“From what? I was told by Dr. Lecter that his hospital results came back negative.”

“You spoke to Dr. Lecter about Will’s results?” She scoffed incredulously. “That’s confidential.”

“And yet, Dr. Lecter assured me there was nothing holding Will back but himself.” Jack stated. “If I start to sense Graham’s hesitancy towards something, I will check in on him. Other than that, I can offer you no other assurance that he is doing well.”

Kerene stared to the crime scene.

“As for why you’re here, I’m curious.” He raised an eyebrow. “You were exposed to a federal case. I don’t think I need to remind you that this needs to remain confidential. Do I make myself clear?”

She nodded.

“If you would excuse me,” he stepped around her, “Have a good day.”

Kerene turned, watching him walk off, and noticed Hannibal’s car had then vanished from sight. She took the car home just as Hannibal helped Will to the front door.

Kerene rubbed her eyes, and looked to her wrists. The phantom memory of someone else’s blood still on her, regardless of the team cleaning her off.

“Thank you.” Will mumbled to Hannibal.

“It’s no problem at all. I was just surprised to get such an early call, is all.” He hummed.

The dogs could be heard barking from inside. Casper standing in the window, barking at the three.

“It’s been quite a night.” Kerene unlocked the front door, ushering Will inside. “We should get inside.”

“Kerene.” Hannibal called. “May I speak with you a moment?”

Will looked between the two.

Kerene glanced to Will, and back. “Only for a second.” Closing the screen door behind her as she turned on the porch light, they walked back towards Hannibal’s car.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” She folded her hands over her chest.

“If I’ve heard correctly, Will put his hands on you.” Hannibal gazed down at her.

“It was nothing. He was just spooked.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No.” She shook her head, “Like I said, it was just an accident. He didn’t mean it.”

Hannibal held out his hand, “May I?”

Kerene looked to the house and back, she sighed, holding one of her wrists out.

Hannibal took her hand delicately, turning her wrist, pressing his soft fingertips into the tendons of her wrist. For a quick moment, he was reading her pulse.

She was anxious, denied him the title of being trustworthy, and felt uncomfortable in his presence. Maybe a burden even.

He gently squeezed her wrist, and she flinched. “Does this cause you any discomfort?” He asked.

“Just socially.” She lied.

“I apologize.” He dropped her hand. “I would treat it like a sprain. Apply ice to keep the swelling down, wear a compression sleeve even-”

“It’s not something serious.” She said, “Don’t be over dramatic.”

“Of course.” He hummed, “You’re fine.”

Kerene watched his eyes, his playful eyes.

“Have a good night, Kerene.” He turned for his car door, and she held the wrist he’d examined.

“Good night.” Softly, she turned for the house as Hannibal pulled away.

Standing just beyond the doorway, Will paced.

“You okay?” She asked.

“Since when did you and Hannibal become friends?”

She paused, “Since you’ve been having sessions with him.”

He nodded, “That’s comforting. I thought you hated him.”

“I did.”

“And something’s changed?”

“Not really, look,” she paused. “I want you to keep seeing him for help. Keep going to sessions. I know this is going to be a difficult healing process, but it’s going to get better.”

“It feels like it keeps going downhill. Every time I hit the bottom, it just opens up and I fall in further.” He slumped into the armchair, and Casper stuck his chin on Will’s lap. Absently, Will scratched his head while tapping his foot.

“You should see Jack Crawford, and have him hold off on adding you to any upcoming cases.”

“I can’t do that.”

“And why not?”

“The more times I don’t show up, the more cases I don’t take, the more people die.”

“We’ve been over this.”

“It’s not clear to you, is it?” He raised his voice, entering with a sense of panic. “I do this to save other people from horrible monsters, from *people.* The more cases I take, the more people I help, the more people *don’t* die.”

Kerene knelt before him. “You can’t save everyone. Stop trying to carry the world on your shoulders.”

Will stood up, “I *can’t-”*

“The problem with police cases is that in order to receive notice about a case, it has to happen. You can’t predict the next time someone is going to murder, or the next time someone kidnaps someone, Will.” She followed him to the stairs as he trekked.

“But I can put away the people who did this, I can stop them from ever hurting someone again."

“You didn’t save Ivory Paine.” She stated.

Will turned in the hallway leading to their bedroom.

“You can’t save her. She’s already gone. Don’t you understand that?”

Will shook his head, “I don’t expect you to understand. I expected you to stand behind me in everything I did.”

“Not when it involves you tearing yourself apart. I’m selfish when it comes to you. I don’t want you to hurt anymore, Will.”

“No one asked you to.” He stepped into his room, and slammed the door shut between them.

Kerene stared at the door, realizing her wrong, and yet not having the voice to state it. The light went out in Will’s room, and silence followed.

For a long while, Kerene sat on her bed with her door open. The dogs trot in and out of the room, sniffing her, and walking to Will’s door with a whine. When he didn’t open the door, they returned to the living room. Kerene stood up, leaning in her doorway, and looked to Casper. Casper sat at the top of the stairwell, looking at Will’s door, and back to Kerene.

She sighed softly, looking to her now bruising wrists. “I care about you, Will.” She said, “You know? When I see you in a dark place, it worries me. I know you don’t like to worry me, but you can’t control how I feel. What I feel,” she stared at the door, “It’s mine to harbor.”

There was no reply. She might as well be talking to the door, and not the person behind it.

“There are things I neglect to tell you, and every time I think about them - I still don’t know if it’s the right time to. You know?” She looked to Casper.

Casper’s tail wagged against the floor, but receiving no attention - he moved downstairs.

“I didn’t mean it, when I said that you couldn’t save Ivory Paine. What I meant to say was that her blood wasn’t on your hands,” she paused, rethinking the words through. “No. I mean- *god.* You didn’t kill her. You didn’t get her killed. *Someone* killed her. I know you’re just trying to make it right by finding her killer, and giving her back the justice she deserves. That

all the victims deserve.. But you lose a piece of yourself to every victim, and it scares me Will. I don't want you to become someone you're not, or someone you don't want to be."

Kerene's eyes panned over the entirety of the door before her.

"If that makes me the bad guy in your story, then so be it. But I did it out of *care* ."

No reply came.

Kerene sighed, "Anyways. Good night." Turning for her room, the door across from her opened a crack. She looked, meeting Will's eyes in the hallway light.

He leaned his side against his doorframe, and crossed his arms over his chest.

Kerene did the same. "I'm sorry."

Will's eyes looked puffy, close to crying.

"I was wrong. I don't expect you to forgive me for what I've said."

He leaned his head against the doorframe. "You only said the truth. I can't get mad at you for that."

Kerene looked to his collar, and back to his red eyes. "Truce?" She held out her hand.

Will stared at her hand a moment, staring at her wrists that *he* bruised, and stuck his hand out to shake.

Kerene crossed the hallway, wrapping her arms around Will, and making him falter into the threshold of his own room. Holding him tightly, she shut her eyes.

Will, hesitant, placed his hands on Kerene's back. Unsure of how safe he was around her, he didn't allow himself the pleasure of even just a hug.

That night, Kerene fell asleep in Will's bed. Her hand strayed on his shoulder, Will stared at her peaceful expression. He despised her ability to fall asleep so easily, how she could trust her own mind. Then again - she wasn't the one waltzing around bodies, imagining herself dissecting them, and enjoying it.

He was the sick and demented person.

Not her.

If he closed his eyes, he'd see Ivory Paine on the ground, her skull bashed in, a rock covered in her blood. If he looked further, he'd see Kerene in the brush of leaves, blood on her brow, looking up at him calling him a monster.

They were right. You are a monster.

He was standing in the park again, the sun just coming over the horizon, the morning dew making the leaves slick. He was going for a walk, before anyone could see him or before he had anywhere to go.

He could see another jogger ahead.

The first of the morning.

“ *Good morning.”* He waved.

The jogger slowed in front of him. He recognized her to be Ivory Paine, she always jogged along these paths early in the morning “ *Good morning* .”

“ *Lovely, isn’t it? The sunrise?”*

“ *I guess it is.”* She smiled.

“ *Say, do you know what time it is?”* He asked.

Ivory Paine looked down to her watch. *“Almost five.”*

“Thank you.” He smiled, “ *You know, you’re the first I’ve seen walk these paths so early in the morning. I thought I was the only one.”*

“Well, I have to get going.”

Something in Will wanted to continue on speaking with her, to gain closure, to see such a beautiful woman up close. He stepped in her way accidentally. *“I apologize.”* He stepped aside, and she stepped to the side.

As if his body wasn’t his own, he grabbed her arm, and she turned abruptly.

“I’m so sorry!” He muttered as he dragged her down with a brute force. “ *Oh! Please. I’m sorry!”*

She kicked and screamed, and without a single thought, he grabbed the rock and knocked her over the head with it. In a panic, to stop the cries, he silenced her.

He stared, in paralyzing shock, and continued to beat her. Until her face caved in, until the noises stopped. He looked to his hand covered in her blood, and back to the body.

Kerene lied under his grip. “ *You are a monster* .”

Will’s eyes shot open, gasping for a breath of air, his body covered in sweat.

The bed beside him was empty, the sun just coming over the horizon.

Kerene had gone out for a morning run.

She was safe from him.

Jogging along with her earbuds in, Kerene moved down the empty road. She was up before Will could notice, and she wouldn't tell him the horrible dream she had. She was back in the cabin, with her father, only this time she wasn't shot by a phantom and unknown person in the woods - it was a faceless man, and his hands were covered in blood.

She didn't know what it meant, but it might have been triggered by the sight of Ivory Paine's blood on her skin.

She forced the thought as far as she could from her mind.

She kept jogging until she'd hit town, and even then - she found herself facing the outskirts.

For reasons unknown, she came to the small corner of the woods, and on the edge sat that lonely retirement home.

Kerene walked along until she'd seen the police tape. Standing at the line, she imagined Ivory Paine's body in the collection of leaves. An innocent young woman with a whole life ahead of her, taken from this world.

Kerene's eye caught an older gentleman walking along the path.

The first she'd seen all morning.

She'd come to realize that he was from the retirement home, one of the older gentlemen she and Will came across. "Excuse me?" She called.

He looked around until he found the voice.

"Excuse me. I don't mean to bother you on your walk." She put her hand up. "My name is Kerene, I spoke with you yesterday."

He stared at her in confusion.

"I was with another man; curly hair, glasses, *this* tall." She gestured.

He shook his head, "I'm sorry, I don't remember you."

Kerene nodded, "That's alright. You know, you're one of the first people I've come in contact with all morning."

"As you are to me."

She looked at the tape, "Tragic, what happened here."

"I suppose so." He said. "We can't help the things we have no control over."

Kerene turned to him, “Are you headed back to the home?”

“Oh, I was hoping to walk a little further.”

“Do you mind if I join you?”

He sheepishly chuckled, “I don’t think I’d be able to keep up with your young pace. I’d only slow you down.”

“That’s alright. It’s been a long morning.”

They followed side by side, leaving the crime scene behind, moving further from the retirement home.

“Do you mind me asking your name?” Kerene asked.

“James.” He said. “But people call me *Jim.”*

“Well, *Jim,* it’s a pleasure to walk with you.” Kerene smiled.

He chuckled softly. “Do you walk these parts often?”

“No, I just got caught up in running and I just kept going. I guess I’ve got a lot to think about if I got this far.”

“You’ve got all the time to worry about things in the future. Don’t waste a second on it now.”

“You must know it well.” Kerene sighed.

“I remember most things, but I believe you should always be true to yourself. And if you feel like something is wrong, or if you’re going down the wrong path, you can always turn around and change it.”

Kerene nodded. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Maybe I’m wrong.” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Kerene chuckled, and shook her head. “I should get back. I shouldn’t even be out here. Will’s probably wondering how far I’ve gotten, or if I’ve run away.”

“You said you visited yesterday?”

“With a friend, yeah. He’s with the FBI, investigating the murder of Ivory Paine. Surely you’ve heard of it?”

He grimaced, clutching his hand. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe I do.” He gestured. “The nurse says I have Dementia. But I don’t believe her. I just don’t get much sleep.”

Kerene gestured to his hand, “Are you alright?”

“Just arthritis.” He insisted.

“My.. *dad* had that. I had to do everything for him.” She smiled, “It sucks getting older.”

“That it does. But it’s our inevitable fate.” Jim stated. “Everything must come to an end.”

Kerene nodded. “You’re morbidly right.” She stepped around him, “I’m sorry for bothering you on your walk.”

“It’s quite alright.” He grimaced again, but smiled through the wave of pain. “You have a good morning, you hear?”

“And you as well.” Kerene turned away.

He grabbed her arm.

She froze, looking back at him.

“On second thought, could you walk me back?” His grip never loosening. “I’m afraid I might lose my way.”

“Of course.” Kerene smiled.

He pried his hand away, clutching it carefully, and they walked side by side to the retirement home. His nurse waited for him at the door, seemingly disappointed at his escape.

“Thank you for bringing him back. He’s always managing to escape.” His nurse ushered him inside.

“It was no problem. We kept each other company.”

“He’s got Dementia, and on top of that arthritis. Lord knows if he doesn’t take his medication, he’ll forget his name.” She retorted. “Thank you. Again.”

Kerene waved goodbye, and from over his shoulder, Jim looked back at her.

She’d eventually managed to get back home, and Will was already showered and drinking his cup of coffee. Going into her room, she noticed his sheets were changed. Furrowing her brow, she grabbed her change of clothes and showered herself.

Tying up her hair, she stepped into the kitchen.

“Good morning.” Kerene pulled the milk out of the fridge.

“Morning.” Will said over his shoulder, staring at the newspaper, as if his racing mind would read it.

“How’d you sleep?”

Will pushed away the haunting image of Kerene in the brush of dead leaves. “Like a baby. You?”

Kerene shut the drawer of utensils, holding her scar. “Just the same.” She turned with her bowl of cereal, and sat across from Will as he sipped his coffee. She glanced at the paper, and back to Will’s disinterested expression.

He looked up at her. “What?”

She chewed, shaking her head. “You never read the paper.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t.”

“I didn’t think you could read.”

He set it down, giving her a *really* look. She smirked. “What’s got you all happy this early in the morning?”

“ *You* .”

Will set down the paper again, gaping at her.

“I’m happy you’re getting more sleep.”

His shoulders visibly deflated, he’d thought different.

“You’re improving.” She clasped her hand over Will’s. “It’s a good thing.”

He scoffed, and nodded. “Still feel like shit.”

She reached up, cupping his cheek, and then his forehead. He keened to the motherly touch. “You’re not too warm. You feel okay. Maybe it’s just the medication, you’ll adjust to it eventually. I’m sure.”

Will nodded again, and sighed through his nose looking at the newspaper. He hid behind it to shelter himself from Kerene’s ridiculing stare. He didn’t like it especially when she looked at him, it made him flustered and put under a spotlight. More than any other person.

Maybe it was because he admired her.

He didn’t like her.

No .

They were roommates. *Pact Partners.* One gets better, and the other gets better.

That was the deal.

He just didn’t anticipate any further attachment.

Kerene brought Will to work with a warning to watch out for ghouls considering it being Friday the 13th, and the car went back to Cindy at work. Insistent on letting Kerene have it for a few more days, Kerene objected. She worked straight through her shift with no problems, and went to lunch. She was sitting outside when the phone rang for her.

“Who is it?’ She asked.

The person who picked it up shrugged.

She rolled her eyes, pressing the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“ *Kerene.* ”

Kerene furrowed her brow, “Hannibal? How’d you know to call this place?”

“ *Will may have told me once or twice about your place of work. I hope you’re not upset.”*

“No. Not at all. Just.. shocked.” She leaned against the wall.

“ *Is this a bad time?”* He asked.

Hannibal and Kerene sat shoulder to shoulder, staring into a pond of lively ducks.

“So, what’re you doing here?” Kerene asked.

Hannibal watched Kerene flick bits of her sandwich into the water, the ducks lapping it up. “I wanted to speak to you about a matter to do with Will.”

Kerene met his eyes, “About what?” She tried to read his expression, but he was lacking in emotion. Even his eyes were hard to read.

“Yesterday. When I brought him home from the crime scene.”

Kerene began picking at the bread again.

“He told me about what happened, and what he saw.”

“And what did he say?”

Hannibal cocked his head aside, a Mute Swan swam at a distance among the bundles of ducks alone. “He envisioned the murderer, standing over Ivory Paine’s body, unable to control his own actions out of fear.”

“Why do I have to know about that?”

“He saw *you.”*

Kerene met his eyes.

“He envisioned hurting you, and it was something he didn’t want to be shared.”

Kerene furrowed her brow. “Why would you tell me that?” Her eyes panned away.

“Because I want you to remain vigilant. Will cares about you, but he is under a great amount of stress, and I believe he is capable of snapping. Even on the one person he cares for most.”

Kerene shook her head, “He wouldn’t hurt me.”

“He already has.”

She covered her wrists. “It was an accident.”

“And the next time, it may not be.” He stood before her.

She gazed up at him.

“You’re trying to save him from himself, but sometimes we can only watch the people we care about dive into insanity.”

“He wouldn’t hurt me.”

He tapped the underside of her chin, and the corner of his lip quirked up. It vanished just as quick. “If he puts his hands on you again, accident or not, you call me.” His eyes flickered to a stray hair on her face. He brushed it back behind her ear, and she flinched back. “I should bring you back. We both have work to do.”

He stepped away from her and she looked back to the ducks again.

Curling her hair behind her ear uncomfortably, she dropped the rest of her food on the floor and followed to be brought back.

Kerene’s mind was filled with the terrible fear of Will’s vision. Of course there would be no reason for Hannibal to lie? Why would he make up such a horrible lie? But most importantly, why would Kerene believe someone else?

If Will did envision this, is that why he’s been so distant? So cut off from getting close to Kerene. All this time he’d been imagining putting her in harm’s way, and under the knife of a murderer’s blade. What if this wasn’t the only time?

Kerene’s stomach felt tight with anxiousness at the thought of going home to face Will. How could she hide this from him without being visibly distant?

When eight o’clock came, she called a cab. When the driver asked her where to, she paused.

“ *Baltimore* .” She gazed aside, then met the driver’s eyes. “Drive me to Maryland.” She sat back.

“Alright.” He shrugged, and started the meter.

Standing before Hannibal’s home, she stared up at the warm lights glowing within. She knocked on the door, and waited for a reply. A shadow came over the curtains, they swayed aside, and the porch light came on.

Hannibal opened the door.

“Kerene? What’re you doing here?”

“I’m sorry to bother you.” She stared at his tie knot, “Can I come in?”

He stepped aside, “Of course.” Shutting the door after her, they followed back towards the kitchen where he was still preparing dinner. “Is there something wrong?”

“I kept thinking about what you told me.”

He picked up his knife, skillfully dicing his tomatoes. “About which piece in particular?”

“About what you said about Will’s hallucinations.”

He nodded, “It worries you that he may be capable of doing you harm.”

“Not that.”

“Then what?”

Kerene watched his hands. “This entire time he’s kept a wall between us, and something so horrible was created behind that wall.”

“Will’s visions are horrible indeed, but they manifest off of the horrible things he has experienced on the field.” Hannibal, done with chopping tomatoes and raw red onions, pulled a loaf of sourdough aside. “You can’t shelter him from that reality. Although, I have seen you attempt many times.” He glanced to her, and back to his cutting. “Have you eaten?”

“Last thing I ate was for lunch.”

He brushed olive oil on both sides of the bread, searing them on the frying pan, “Good. I’ve made just enough for two. Join me for dinner.”

“I shouldn’t. Will’s-”

“Home safe, I’m sure.” He stated, “You’ve come all this way. We can speak over dinner.” He smiled, “And I have vegan options this time.”

Kerene smiled softly, and continued watching him cook.

Both sat at the table, Hannibal served the Bruschetta Al Pomodoro as lovely appetizers, and for the main course - Spanish vegan Paella with a side of meat, for Hannibal, paired with a sparkling Prosecco.

“So.” Hannibal hummed, cutting up his filet. “What would you like to speak about first?”

Kerene set down her utensils. “I don’t know.” She scoffed. “It’s all so overwhelming.”

“Carrying unnecessary baggage can be that way.”

“What baggage do I carry?”

“Well,” he hummed. “You carry trauma, it is the ultimate baggage among society. Something of the past has haunted you, and shaped you into the person you are today. It leads you away from hobbies and people you once loved, and shelters you from everyday activities. In turn, you become stand-off-ish and defensive to open opinions. You feel the world is out to get you, is it not?”

Kerene sat back.

“You stated you don’t like being psychoanalyzed, but being put off by Will’s visions is the only reason you’re now avoiding him. You also have to understand, it’s my job to help those in need. Even those who refuse help.” He gestured to her plate. “Eat.”

Kerene stared at the plate, and instead sipped at the water on the table.

Hannibal watched her movements. “Will has told me many things, but not about your traumatic past.”

“He has no right to.” She stated.

“You are right about that.” He stared into her daring eyes. “But if there is anything I can do, I can help you learn how to cope with what you’ve encountered. Or lessen the triggers until they no longer harm you.”

“Like *condition* me?”

“It’s just like changing a bad habit; it’ll only take your willingness and openness to possible triggers.”

“That’s if you find out what triggers a person.”

“I’m good at what I do.” He insisted, sipping his wine.

Kerene looked to the tabletop with a soft sigh.

“Are there other matters at hand to do with Will?”

“I’d like to stop talking about Will now.” Kerene demanded.

Hannibal nodded. “Surely. What would you like to talk about?”

Kerene sat in front of him, quietly bombarded with tens of questions, but unknowing which to ask first. The room felt bare and empty, regardless of the warm fire nestled beside them. Her eyes panned back to Hannibal’s patient state. “Have you always lived in Maryland?”

“No. I moved to America at a young age.”

“From where?”

“Lithuanian.”

Kerene perked up, “Why’d you move?”

He paused, “It wasn’t by choice. My mother and father had survived Nazis overrunning Lithuanian in 1941, and a bombing claimed the life of my youngest sister.”

Kerene stared with wide eyes, “I’m *so* sorry.” She looked downright devastated. “That’s horrible.”

“I had never met her.” Hannibal stated, “I’d just hoped she didn’t feel anything.”

Kerene stared at her plate.

“It did still affect me though; it made me lose my faith in God. It made me come to the conclusion that there was no justice left in this world.”

“And now?”

He smirked, and settled back. “Let’s just say I still hold that idea dear.”

Kerene nodded. “Then what?”

“I moved in with my aunt in Paris and attended a medical school there. I was the youngest to graduate with a degree.”

“Something to be proud of.”

“Indeed. One of the first.” He sipped his wine, gazing into the fire. “I visited Lithuanian then.”

“And did what?”

“Seeked out my sister’s murderers.”

Kerene gazed into his unchanging, daring eyes. “And did what?”

“Held them accountable for the life they’d taken.”

Kerene didn’t press further to have him explain, she didn’t want to know what horrible things Hannibal got up to in order to avenge his sister’s death. All she could think of was the suffering he’d gone through, knowing there was a time where he could’ve met his sister. They could’ve been a happy family.

No wonder Hannibal was alone.

Hannibal wrapped up Kerene’s food, seeing as she wasn’t in the mood to eat anymore, and walked her to the front door. “If there’s anything else I can do for you, give me a call.” He held the door open for her as she stepped out onto the porch. “I’ve already called a cab for you. It should be here any minute now.”

“Thanks.”

“Have a good night, Kerene.” He smiled.

“Hannibal?” She called as he stepped back.

“Yes?”

“Do you think your perception of the world will change one day? Maybe there isn’t a God, but.. do you think your faith will return in humanity?”

“Humanity has its flaws, but my grief isn’t with humanity itself.”

“So there’s a chance you might change your mind?”

“I’ll tell you what. You find me a single reason to instill my faith, and I’ll change my mind.” He smiled.

Kerene smiled back as the taxi pulled up.

“Good night Kerene.”

“Good night.”

Watching her head down the stairs and get into the taxi, Hannibal waved as the taxi pulled away. His smile very carefully dropped, and he turned for the door with a solemn stare.

He had told no one about his past, not even Will. No one had the privilege to know about the horrible things he’d done to his victims, cutting their cheeks and eating them. Having his first taste of human flesh, and the need to keep consuming them devouring him.

He wouldn’t taint Kerene with his blood stained hands, he would keep her safe from harm. He would keep her clean, away from the sharp knives society wanted to plunge into her delicate, soft skin. He would shelter her, and keep her from knowing the truth.

He had chosen her.

Only she didn't know it yet.

Kerene managed to get through the front door, and it was as far as she could go without being detected. Will, lying on the couch with a blanket over himself, opened his eyes and began to slowly sit up.

"Kerene?" He called.

She stared at his docile state.

"What time is it?"

"It's late." She said. "I'm going to head to bed."

"Wait." He called, looking to his watch. "Where have you been?"

She paused by the couch, "I was with a *friend* for dinner. We talked longer than I expected."

"You didn't call." He said. "I was worried. I text you."

"I didn't see it."

Without his glasses, he couldn't see her expression for sure. She was a little fuzzy. He squinted at her, only making his headache worse. He hadn't had proper sleep in four days now.

"Look, I'm going to head to bed. Alright?" Kerene started for the hall. "Good night."

Will listened to her trot up the stairs, the dogs following her. Will looked to Casper at his feet, unmoved from his slumped position. "Just you and me, huh?"

Casper rolled onto his side, and huffed.

Will did the same. Glancing up, he reached over to his phone on the table, and sighed. Furrowing his brow, he sat up abruptly. "Kerene?" He called. He rushed to his feet, tripping up the stairs. "Kerene!"

Kerene stepped out of the bedroom.

"Kerene!" Will rushed into the hall.

"What? *What* !" She muttered.

He turned the phone to her. "Another body just showed up." He huffed.

"Okay? And?"

“It’s someone from the retirement home.”

For reasons unknown, Kerene accompanied Will on the journey back to the retirement home. Red and blue lights flashed all around, an ambulance, coroner’s already on the scene. The body was found not far from the retirement home, a nurse having just gone out for a smoke break, on the phone with her boyfriend until the line went dead.

She didn’t report to her station an hour ago.

The body was still *warm* .

“What’re we looking at?” Crawford asked as the group hoarded the body, Will stood aside.

“Strangulation. No bludgeoning done like the last body.” Beverly stated, knelt beside the body with a flashlight.

“Was the body moved?”

“We searched the area. This is the only spot she could’ve gone down.”

“What’s her *name* ?” Will asked, staring the nurse in the face.

“Josephine Claremont.” Beverly stated. “She overlooked half a dozen patients in that retirement home.”

Will stared over the body. Looking in the dark for *something.*

“What do you think?” Jack asked.

Will remained quiet, overlooking the body, and the ground around it. His eyes panned up from the beam of Beverly’s flashlight to the flashing blue and white lights.

Kerene was over there, waiting for *him* .

Why did he bring her along? Just to drag her behind him? What was wrong with him?

“ *What do you see?”* A phantom Kerene knelt before him. *Not-Kerene.* The Kerene he’d murdered over and over, the one who knows of his monstrous ways, of his murderous tendencies.

He lowered his glasses to stick his fingers in his eyes and rub. “I need a moment.” He stated.

Jack nodded to Beverly, and the two stepped aside.

Will opened his eyes, expecting *Not-Kerene* to vanish. But she remained knelt beside him now.

“ *What do you see?”* She asked again, staring at the nurse’s body.

Will tried to keep his cool, forcing his eyes from the hallucination. “Her body is still warm.”

“ *On an October night like this, that could mean two hours or six. Algor Mortis follows a steady progression of losing 1.5 degrees every hour until the body reaches the exterior temperature.”*

Will clenched his jaw, lifting her eyelids, flashing his light between them. “Her pupils still dilate.”

“ *Meaning?”*

“ She’s past the primary flaccidity.”

“ *Two hours.. or six?” Not-Kerene* teased.

Will turned the neck very gently, “Rigor Mortis hasn’t set in.”

“So?”

“She was killed three hours ago.”

“ *How do you know for sure?”*

Will shut his eyes, kneeling at the body’s head, holding the sides of her face. “This is my design.” He opened his eyes.

Standing on the pathway, all lights had vanished. He was out of breath, a little cold, and yet he continued moving. He could hear a voice ahead, see the orange glow of a cigarette as Josephine took a puff.

Will followed closely out of sight.

“ *-Yes, no. I was just curious because we hadn’t spoken about it. I didn’t want to bring it up.”* Josephine Claremont said.

Will held his hand tight, approaching her through the brush.

Cut off from listening to the conversation, Josephine was seized back by the hair, and thrown to the ground. The phone was lost in the leaves as her face was pushed into the dirt.

Will didn’t get joy out of it, unable to control himself, he began to cry, sob even as he apologized over and over. Until the mumbling stopped, until the movements halted, and she went limp.

Will turned her over on her back.

With a sudden jolt of life, she kicked up again. At this time, Will put his hand around her neck.

She stared up at him in confusion.

Then in shock.

And Will's eyes fogged up with guilty tears, he blinked them away, forcing his emotions aside.

Struggling under him was Kerene.

He blinked, and fell back. Scrambling away from the body, he gasped helplessly until his back hit a tree.

The body was still dead.

And not Kerene's.

" *What do you see?" Not-Kerene* appeared before him with a haunting, dead look.

He met its eyes, trapped in the void.

" *Will."*

Will shut his eyes.

"Will?"

He opened his eyes.

"Will? Are you alright?"

He stared up at Jack who'd returned to the crime scene.

"I said, are you alright?"

Will helped himself up. "Yeah."

"Are you sure?"

He looked to the unmoved body. "I'm fine."

Jack eyed him. "Alright then." He turned back to the body. "Any leads?"

"Start with the patients. See if they'd heard anything," Will said out of breath.

Jack nodded, "You're sure you're alright."

Will stepped aside towards where he'd last left Kerene. "I'm fine." When he returned, Kerene was *indeed* not in the same spot. He felt a sense of anxiety, adding into the panic he'd already encountered. He didn't want to see her but needed to know she was real, and not some figment of his imagination.

He wandered the flashing blue and red lights until they surrounded him, until his vision began spinning, all the noises morphed into one big crash. Will found himself tripping forward, and landing on his hands and knees. He looked to his palm with a hiss, the ground chipping at his skin, making him blush with blood.

“Will?” Kerene called, appearing between two vehicles.

“What do you see?” Not-Kerene whispered in his ear.

Falling to her knees, she helped him sit back, and examined his hands. “What’re you doing?”

“I was looking for you.” He said softly.

Kerene furrowed her brow, put off by his recent occurrence with the body and his need to find her. Hannibal’s warnings haunt her.

Will’s eyes lulled shut for a second as his head moved aside, as if he were falling asleep on the spot.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He pulled himself up, exhausted by his own actions suddenly.

“You don’t look *fine.”*

“I’m fine.” He helped himself stand by leaning up on the fender of the car. He wavered.

“When’s the last time you slept?”

“Last night, while I was waiting for you.” He started for the retirement home, and Kerene followed.

They stepped through the front hall and the building had been overtaken by police, speaking amongst nurses and themselves. Will approached the front desk.

“Special Agent, with the FBI. Where can I find the patients under Miss Claremont’s care?” He asked.

“They’re all in the east wing.”

“Can I have a list of their names, please?”

While the nurse collected their names for Will, he glanced behind him out of habit of looking over his shoulder, and caught Kerene’s worried expression. She stood at a short distance from him, her arms wrapped around herself, and looking to the lobby filled with police.

He turned away quickly, to grab the slip of paper with room numbers. Will started down the hall, Kerene followed. He’d knocked on the door of the previous met Marlene, asking her a few questions on her whereabouts, and if she’d last seen Josephine Claremont.

Kerene wandered between the hall and the room, unsure if she was allowed to hear this investigation. Down the hall sat a lounging area, open and inviting, a grand window looking over the east courtyard.

She paused when she noticed someone else had been there. “Oh, excuse me.” She stepped aside, and furrowed her brow. “It’s you.”

The older man looked up at her, “I’m sorry?”

“ *Jim* .”

He stared at her in confusion, “Can I help you with something?”

She remembered his Dementia. “My name is Kerene. We’ve met before. Out in the courtyard, and in the morning. For a walk?”

Jim sat in question for a moment, and nodded. “I believe I do remember. But, I’m sorry, I don’t remember clearly.”

“It’s alright.” She settled in a chair across from him. “We spoke about some things I would like to forget too.”

He stared at her.

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to have seen Josephine Claremont around?”

“Miss Claremont?”

“Your nurse?”

“Ah, yes. She was here just a minute ago.”

Kerene nodded.

“She said she would be back. We would play checkers when she came back.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

“I-” he shook his head, “I don’t believe so. I assume to get a snack.” He laughed, “We always sneak snacks at night. Though she tells me I shouldn’t.”

Kerene smiled.

“She is one of the good ones, you know?”

Kerene sighed softly, unwilling to tell him about the horrible incident that’s happened to her. She shouldn’t be the one to tell him. “Say, do you mind if I asked you a kind of personal question?”

“I’ll try to give you the best advice I can.”

She switched seats to the one beside him. “I have this friend, he’s going through some things. Maybe you know the type; sheltered, shut in from the world, and scared to show what monsters or nightmares he has.”

Jim began to grow grave with the question.

“He won’t.. *Tell* me how he feels. But I have a feeling there’s something inside of him, some horrible trauma, or uncontrollable urge.” She frowned, “How do I tell him it’s okay to do the things he needs to? But to keep himself in mind. You know?”

Jim nodded slowly. “I can only say,” he paused thinking slowly, “This *friend* of yours, who’s troubled in his dreams and in his waking life, that it’ll only progress through time. He’ll begin to spiral, and sometimes things will shift and turn, bending his reality. Soon he won’t know what’s real and what’s in his head.”

Kerene furrowed his brow as he began to wring his hands together.

“He’ll wonder if the people around him are out for him, if he can truly trust anyone, or even *himself* . After all, if he can’t trust himself, can he trust anything?”

Kerene gently pulled back from his tangent, hoping to gain some distance between him and his spiraling episode. She knew it too well from Will.

“Maybe, just *maybe,* the voices in his head are telling him horrible things. Fueled by nightmares, and visions, and-” Jim turned his attention to Kerene. She must’ve looked like she’d seen a crazy person. “- *Loneliness* . To stand in a room full of people, and feel utterly *alone* .” He clenched his hand in the other.

“I think I’d better see if the cafeteria is still open.” Kerene stood. “I’m a little hungry-”

He grabbed her wrist tightly, looking up at her. “Please don’t go.”

She looked down to his hand, and back to his expression. “I won’t be long.”

“I can’t control-” he shook his head, “If you don’t sit back down, bad things will happen.”

Kerene began to shake. “Please let go of my hand.”

He shook his head, “ *It* wont let me.” He looked at his own hand, “I can’t control it. *It*.. moves on its own. Please sit.”

Kerene carefully sat back down, and his hand didn’t untether itself. She glanced to it.

“I’ve done something horrible, haven’t I?” He asked.

Kerene shook her head.

“I know I have.” He put his hand to his forehead, “I just can’t *remember* .” He lightly beat himself in the head. “It’s like a dream.”

Hands trembling gently, Kerene's gaze didn't break from Jim's face.

"They keep telling me it's arthritis, but It has a mind of it's own. It wants to do bad things."

"How.. do you know?" Kerene's voice was below a whisper.

"I can feel it. It wants to hurt you."

Kerene's eyes began to well up.

"But.. I can't keep fighting it." He shook his head, "I don't want to hurt you. You seem so nice." He pressed his hand to his head again, "It all started after the last stroke. I thought I was just crazy, but," he shook his head, "It's got a mind of it's own."

"You're hurting me." Kerene said softly.

"I can't control it." He too began to tear up. "I'm afraid I might hurt you."

A tear fell from Kerene's eyes.

"Please don't cry." He frowned. "I don't want to do this. Just don't run."

From the hall, Will appeared.

Kerene gave a breath of relief, and tears fell down her cheek.

"I was looking for you." Will said, and upon noticing her fearful expression, his eyes narrowed to his hostile grip on her wrist. He defensively turned to Jim. "Kerene," he put his hand out, "Come here."

Kerene shifted.

"Please don't." Jim warned, his hand squeezing tighter.

"Kerene." Will called urgently. "I'm going to have to ask you to let go of her." He neared.

"I *can't."* Jim worried, "I can't control it. It won't let go."

"What do you see?"

Will looked to Kerene.

Not-Kerene sat in her place, with her wrist in Jim's hold, her expression slack. " *He can't control It. He's forcing her to stay, and yet he's scared. What do you see?"*

Will looked to his hand. "They told me you're a Dementia patient, is that right?"

Jim shook his head, "I know I did something horrible. I can't remember. I'm sorry." He looked to Kerene.

" *He suffers Dementia. He can't remember what he's done. Is he or is he not the killer, Will?"*

Kerene began to sob helplessly. “Will.” She cried in fear.

Will helplessly grimaced.

“ *He can’t control his own movements. That’s deterioration of the brain. Damage.”*

“Stroke.” Will stated.

“What?”

“You suffered a stroke? Right?”

“Yes?”

“How long ago?”

“ *What do you see?” Not-Kerene* now stood before him.

“You suffer from Corticobasal degeneration; a disease in which affects motor functions and processing information in the brain. You believe your hand is not your own to control, that it’s a different entity from you. In the last seven years you suffered from a stroke, and declining mental health. Did you not?”

He began to cry, “Please. *Help* me.”

Kerene, now sobbing, looked to Will again and they held eye contact.

“I know you believe your hand is not in your control, but I can assure you - this is your body. You can control it.”

“Please don’t make me hurt her. I don’t want to.” Cried Jim.

“Kerene. Everything is going to be alright. I promise. Do you trust me?”

She nodded.

He stepped forward, holding his hand out to her. “Take my hand.”

“No. No.” Jim muttered. “Don’t!”

“Kerene.” Will called. “I won’t let anything happen to you.” He stated sincerely. “On three.”

“No!” Jim lurched forward for Kerene’s neck and Will seized her hand. Pulling her from his grip, she tumbled to the floor.

With his gun pulled, Will shoved Jim back into his chair. “Don’t move!” He screamed.

Kerene sobbed, trying to catch her breath as her panic attack rode in.

Will called to the front desk, “I need back up. I have the suspect in custody in the east wing lounge area.”

Jim clutched his chest, giving a painful wail.

“Hey. Hey!”

Jim gasped.

“Send a medical team. He’s going into cardiac arrest.”

The team came down the hall immediately, and Jim was ushered out in a stretcher with his left wrist cuffed to the frame. Kept at a distance, Kerene sat in the back of the ambulance truck with a trauma blanket over her. Clutching her wrists once again, she wouldn’t stop shaking.

Will stepped into her sight.

She gazed up at him, and another wave of tears came over her. She held her arms out, and Will came to her. Stepping into her arms, he too held her tightly as she sobbed into his chest.

“I’m so sorry.” He cried, holding her head. He kissed her head, and shut his eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

She only sobbed, holding him tighter. She felt as if the floor had been ripped out from under her, and every stable beam that held her was void. Will was holding onto her by a thread, as he was barely keeping himself afloat.

When the crying would stop, she knew the numbness would follow. The distrust towards any forward moving person, anyone who raises their hands to her even if it’s to shake her hand or offer a hug, she’d flinch. She’d turn into herself, and shelter herself off from the cruel world.

The only person she could trust was Will, but she didn’t know if that was the truth.

When it comes down to it, the only strong support she’d be able to stand on, was *Hannibal* .

She could trust Hannibal.

He would become her anchor.

Chapter End Notes

Alien Gand Syndrome is a horrible thing, and I do feel for those who have to suffer through it.

Take care of yourself, please. Drink a glass of water, take your meds, have a cookie, call out of work for a self care day, go for a walk (if you're not in a COVID restricted area), watch a childhood favorite movie, take a bubble bath, or just listen to your favorite song over and over and over again. You matter to the world, and if you don't think that, you matter to me. I hold you in my heart, you wonderful stranger. You are a big piece of this

world, and you make it amazing. You can be forgiven, you can forgive, you can start over, and you can do anything you put your effort into, even if you're struggling in the darkest corner. You can do this. I promise.

Learning To Float

Chapter Notes

> Aye! Happy New Year, and may your year be filled with abundance, financial abundance, and peace! :) Starting the year off strong with throwing out the old and bringing in new, and exciting things. :) Here's a chapter update for you. I hope you enjoy, stay safe, stay healthy, and be kind.
>
> This is a long chapter, just fyi!
>
> Chapter trigger warnings: Mentions of suicide, non-consensual drug use, mentions of alcohol abuse, graphic depictions of dead bodies

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Halloween passed uneventfully and avoided. The Thanksgiving holiday would come in one week, and the pair who lived in Wolf Trap would only turn to each other to call family.

The incident of the last case was never brought up again, but Will tried to foster Kerene's new trauma while dealing with his own. He'd continued to go to Dr. Lecter for therapy and continued helping Jack with his cases.

The voices in Will's head seemingly progressed.

Kerene, off for the week, lingered around the kitchen while he readied for work.

He leaned into the doorway, "I'm going to be heading out."

"Okay." She mumbled, staring at the coffee maker as it finished its brew.

"Do you want me to bring home something?"

"Sure."

Will nodded and shifted his jacket between his hands. "If you need anything-"

"I'll call."

He stepped out of the doorway, and headed for the front door, seeing as there was no conversation there.

Kerene listened for the front door to close and lock behind him before moving. She watched Will get into the cab and drive off.

She had been burdened every day since the incident with avoiding work, conversations with people, men in particular. She couldn't find the courage to tell anyone anything, not even Hannibal.

She hadn't seen Hannibal in a month, not since that day.

Kerene took the dogs out, fed them, and collectively gave them baths. Some enjoyed it, others refused to sit still. When the hassle had been finished, she overheard her phone in the next room.

The caller ID read *Will.*

She paused; what did he need? Was it important? Was he calling just to see if she'd eaten? Slept? Drank water? Showered?

The call ended and there was no voicemail following.

She moved for the kitchen when her phone gave another ring. Grabbing the phone without hesitation this time, she answered. "What?"

" *Am I interrupting something?* "

Kerene looked at the caller ID, this time it read *Hannibal* . "No. I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

" *I feel bad for that person."*

Kerene sighed. "What's up?"

" *How are you?"*

" Peachy."

" *I'd like to ask you a favor."*

"What kind?"

"It won't be a burden. I promise. In return, I'll offer you something for the future. "

Kerene furrowed her brow.

Kerene stood before Hannibal in a tailoring shop, her eyes diving over the various patterns and tie squares on display.

Hannibal watched her aimless pacing as the tailor measured him once more.

"Kerene." He called.

She looked up, approaching.

“Could you bring me a necktie with red accents?”

She furrowed her brow, “Any tie?”

“Yes. Preferably no solids.”

The tailor gestured in a general direction, and Kerene followed to the front window. A vast collection of ties overwhelmed her; she would bring him some to choose from. *Yes.* He’ll make the decision in the end.

She passed a few worthy ones, and ugly ones. Patterned, pinstriped, solids. *No solids* , Hannibal stated. Kerene stood over the table of designed neckties, and one in particular stood out to her - a black tie, accented with red poppies and sweet peas. Pulling its silk into her fingers, she fell in love with it alone.

She’d always loved sweet pea flowers, regardless of their poisonous being.

Plucking a few other designs, she crossed the room to Hannibal just finishing up. “Found some?”

“I picked a few to choose from.”

Hannibal collected the bunch and passed them over his shoulder. The favored one resting against his palm. He smiled softly to the design. “Poppy flowers and sweet peas?” He glanced to Kerene. “Any reason you’ve picked this one specifically?”

She shrugged, “It’s just a tie.”

He hummed, holding out the others to the tailor who put them over his forearm. “Did you know these two were my favorite?” He asked.

“No.”

He continued to turn it over in his hands, “In Lithuanian, my mother used to plant sweet peas. She’d say instead of giving someone a bouquet of roses or lilies, give them sweet peas. They stand for gratitude, or happiness. I’ve always given them to others, but never planted them on my own.”

Stepping down from the stool, Hannibal stood before her, holding the tie out.

“Hold onto it for me.” He insisted as she took back the tie in confusion. “You did well.” He stepped around her.

She turned, and slowly proceeded to compute. “Did you just analyze me?”

“Does that bother you if I did?”

“Yes.”

“And yet we’re still friends.” He smirked, turning for the tailor at the counter.

Kerene stared at the back of his head and the tie still in her hand. What was he getting at?

They finished up, venturing for the grocery store next. Kerene followed Hannibal around as he walked through the produce aisle.

“Do you cook often?” Hannibal asked suddenly while feeling for hard avocados.

“I eat out more.”

“When meals are prepared at home, do you cook more or does Will?”

“Why?”

“Cooking at home has many benefits; you save on expenses; you eat the food you provide so you know it’s fresh. It also increases your culinary skills.”

“Why am I following you around, Hannibal? Really? You can’t be so lonely you wanted my company.”

He paused, considering the thought. “I’m going to speak about Will now.” He warned.

She rolled her eyes gently.

“Will has expressed his discomfort towards your self isolation. Yet he hadn’t told me what happened.” He glanced at her, as if to usher her in to tell him.

“What’s there to tell? I was put in danger.”

“And in this danger, did you get hurt?”

“No.” She lied, holding her wrists behind her back.

Hannibal turned to her, making her stop abruptly. “Do you find the need to lie compulsive?”

“No.”

He hummed in amusement and continued walking through the aisle.

“For patient confidentiality, you sure do talk a lot about Will’s sessions.”

“Only because I know you will use my words to heart, and it will only help Will further. It seems, after several months, there’s still a barrier between the both of you. You live together, eat together, and sleep in the same household - but there are things you haven’t told him.”

Kerene came to a slow stop.

“You don’t tell him about how you feel because you’re still afraid to let someone else carry the weight for once. You feel like a burden, ashamed for feeling a certain way, and believe there can be no one who can share the same feelings, aspirations, or fears as you.” He turned

to her, “But I can assure you, I know how it feels to be abandoned in a harsh world, with only myself to turn to. You and I are alike in that way.”

“Only you have a coping mechanism, and I don’t.”

“There are many ways to go about recovering from trauma. I can only help you if you are willing to be open minded to the opportunity.”

She followed him into the deli area, he paused to look to the cheeses. Stopping beside the cart, she held onto the sides of it, standing closely to him. “Trauma doesn’t go away.”

“There is no cure for PTSD.” He stated, “But with the correct treatment or maybe even medication, the symptoms can become dormant for years.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Would that be something you’re interested in?”

“I don’t like shrinks.”

“It would be no different than what we do currently.”

“What? Having dinner and taking me out to get your suits tailored? That’s normal? You do it with your other patients?”

“If it is the way you can cope, then so be it.” He plucked up a bag of grated goat cheese and put it back down. “Have you ever had *Coq Au Vin?”*

Kerene furrowed her brow. “What?”

The day was filled with rough encounters and horrible slideshows, getting a ride back to the farmhouse, Will pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose as the taxi came to a stop.

Hannibal’s car was out front.

The sun had already set two hours ago.

He paid the driver, starting past Hannibal’s car. Glancing in, he’d confirmed it to be his. Going to the front door, the door was unlocked. Brushing it open, he could smell a mixture of mouth-watering chicken and bacon. Heading to the kitchen, he could hear Kerene’s laughter.

When Will came into sight, their bantering ended rather quickly; the laughter bubbling out and they’d turned to him like an unwanted visitor in his own home. He glanced between the two, “What’s going on?”

“Will,” Hannibal smiled, “Have you just come from work?”

“Yeah.” He looked to Kerene, who was red in the face from drinking wine. “I did.”

“I was just showing Kerene here how to perfect *Coq Au Vin.* She is an exceptional cook.”

Kerene shook her head and raised her eyebrows playfully while sipping from her wine glass.

“When did this become a thing?” Will gestured between the two.

Kerene sighed like the question was a burden. “Dinner is served. Are you joining us?” Setting the Dutch oven onto the stove top, she grabbed her tongs.

“Allow me.” Hannibal rose from the island top, rounding the counter. “You’ve done more than enough. Why don’t you set the table instead?”

Kerene glanced at Will, still standing in the doorway, and back to the cabinets. She crossed the room to the table and set out three plates.

“Will, could you give me a hand?” Hannibal called.

Will moved from his spot, and towards Hannibal. He was instructed to hold the pot as Hannibal dressed the plates, a simple but blind action.

Hannibal didn’t need help, he needed to move Will’s attention.

“Thank you.” Hannibal said, wiping his hands. “Please. I’ll serve you.” He gestured to the table.

Will crossed the room, pulling the chair out across from Kerene. She downed the rest of her wine and held her fist against her lips to keep it down. Taking off his glasses, he set them on the windowsill beside him.

Hannibal lowered the plate before him and Kerene. “ *Coq Au Vin.* Made by *yours* truly.” He gestured to Kerene as he grabbed the wine bottle to refill Kerene’s glass. “It is bone-in chicken thighs, Bella mushrooms, carrots, and onions with a Brandy and dry Pinot Noir sauce.” He offered wine to Will, Will denied.

Hannibal filled his own glass before sitting down.

“What more can I say?” Hannibal tucked a napkin into his lap.

Will stared at the food in front of him, and Kerene hesitated, but ate her food openly.

Hannibal looked to Will, “Is something the matter?”

He glanced between the two, “I didn’t know you two were buddies.”

“Hardly.” Kerene stated.

He nodded, “Yet you’ve come over and cooked dinner.”

“Don’t.” Kerene pressed her fingers into her eyes.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t make this a big thing. Don’t make this about you.”

“About me?”

Hannibal wiped his mouth, “I’ll let you score your grievances over.” He moved his plate and stood up to exit the kitchen.

Kerene rolled her eyes, reaching for her wine glass.

Will pulled it away.

“Are you serious right now?”

“When did you become buddies with Hannibal?”

“Don’t be a child.” She reached for the glass.

He put the wine glass on the windowsill, “You know you’re not supposed to be drinking. You’re on medication.”

“Not anymore.” She muttered.

“What?”

“I stopped taking the medication.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t think when I’m on them. I have this heaviness weighing on me when I take them, and it makes me feel like shit. It’s bad enough I already do.”

“What do you mean?”

Kerene groaned, covering her face. “For once, can I just have one good dinner? I cooked, and I cleaned. I didn’t serve anything until you got here. And all you ever want to do is argue.”

“Me?” Will laughed harshly. “I have been kind and understanding this entire time-”

“It wouldn’t have happened if you didn’t involve me in the first place. I was getting better, and you shoved me right back down.”

“How was I supposed to know? I don’t have foresight; I can’t see into the future. I didn’t know you’d end up right in front of the killer.”

“You let me out of your sight.”

“You walked off.”

“You gave me reason not to stay beside you. If I wanted to feel like I was alone, I would just go back to my dad’s house. Maybe then I’d have a resemblance of *home* .”

“Maybe you should.”

Kerene stopped.

Will pulled away. “You made me feel guilty for including you in things, and... and for things I had no control over.” He began to stutter, “I feel like a burden to you all the time, and for once in my life, I wanted you to be there for one victory. And I couldn’t even do that without you getting hurt for it.”

“I don’t belong in the police force; I don’t want to be a part of that. I’ve seen more than I can handle.”

“Then maybe some time away from me will help you.”

Kerene set down her utensils, nodding with her hands in her lap. “You think so?”

Will forced himself to avert his eyes, “Just go.” He stood up from the dining table, collecting his plate, and setting it on the counter with his back to the room.

Kerene looked to Hannibal, who’d appeared in the doorway with his jacket over his forearm. She stood up abruptly and started for the hall past Hannibal silently standing in the doorway. “Take me away from here.”

Will looked over his shoulder to Hannibal, and Hannibal turned from the hall to him. “I’ll look out for her.”

Without a word more, Hannibal started for the staircase to wait for Kerene to return with her bags.

Will turned to the now empty kitchen, and it started to settle in.

He didn’t want Kerene to leave, but he needed to keep her at a distance. He’d obsessed over keeping her so close that she’d gotten hurt by him so many times. Maybe the world was trying to tell him he needed to be alone, that he could never find a family, or love for that matter. That there was no middle ground he could ever meet on.

“ *What do you see?”*

Not-Kerene stood in the hall. Will shut his eyes.

“You can pretend all you want, but you know your misplaced anger is a secondary feeling to jealousy. She’s grown distant from you, and closer to Hannibal. Keep it up, and she’ll leave. The moment she does, she won’t look back. You know that, and it hurts you.”

“Shut up.” He said softly.

Not-Kerene crossed the room, standing in Will's space. Speaking to the side of his face as he refused to meet her eyes. *"Kerene and Hannibal. What a lovely pair. Don't you think? What do you think they do when you're not around? Make dinner? Drink wine together? Laugh? It's more than you've ever done for her. It's almost like... Hannibal is replacing you." Not-Kerene* emphasized. *"And you're letting it happen."*

Kerene came back down the stairs, Hannibal assisting her with her bags as she followed with tears in her eyes. "Casper, no. *Stay* ." She said to the dog who wanted to join her outside. " *Stay."*

Casper whined, still attempting to follow.

" *Stay."* Kerene cried, petting his head, and kissing his face. "It's going to be okay." She promised as the dog sat down, watching her leave through the front door.

"There she goes." Not-Kerene mocked.

Hannibal put Kerene's things into the trunk, helping her into the passenger's seat.

"And you'll be all alone. With me." She smirked. " *You and I are the perfect pair."*

Will forced himself from the counter, down the hall, and opened the front door. He stepped out into the chilly night, watching the taillights take down the road.

"What did you expect?" Not-Kerene leaned against the porch railing, *"You told her to run away from you. And she did. Maybe she sees what kind of monster you are, and now realizes - this is who you are. This is who you've always been." Not-Kerene* leaned her chin on Will's shoulder, wrapping her arms around him securely.

His panic attack kicked in, weighing in on his body.

"You and I." Not-Kerene pat his chest. *"We're going to be great friends."*

Kerene sat in an armchair facing the fire with a blanket over her, her face was now red from crying.

Hannibal offered her a glass of water.

She accepted it, cradling it in her hands while gazing into the flames.

"Do you want to talk about how you're feeling?" He asked, gazing down at her.

She stared at the glass of water, "Like shit."

Hannibal sat in the chair across from her. "I'm sorry. You've gone through something traumatic and having no one to turn to can be difficult."

“I’m used to it by now.”

“Apparently not.”

She looked at him.

“If you were, you wouldn’t be crying.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what?”

Kerene watched a droplet of water fall down the glass. “In all my life, I’ve had two points that felt like the lowest. Like I couldn’t get out of the rut I was in.”

“Is this another rut?”

She stared into the flames. “It might be.”

“What were the other two?”

“When my father died.”

He nodded slowly, “How long ago was it?”

“July.”

“How did he die?”

She choked up, “He killed himself in the hospital. He was improving; he’d been admitted because he was *suffering* .” She frowned, shutting her eyes. “The last time I saw him.. I didn’t say *I love you.”*

Hannibal watched her break down, covering her face. He moved the glass of water to the side table, and knelt before her, holding her wrist gently. “You feel guilty for not having said anything?”

“The last time I saw him, I said horrible things.”

“And you carry the weight of those words?”

She nodded.

“What did you say?”

She sobbed. “We got into a fight because I didn’t want help. I was drinking too much, and he said I’d end up like him if I didn’t stop. I was angry for no reason, and I told him.. I told him I’d never want to be anything like him. A father who couldn’t be there for his own daughter when she needed him most.” She wiped her eyes. “He must’ve been so alone.”

Hannibal pulled Kerene into his arms as she sobbed. He stroked the back of her head gently, hushing her down like he would a child. “His death is not your fault. Though you may believe his actions following the argument are connected, as you said, he was sick in the head. Mental illness, if unchecked, will always prevail.”

Pulling away, Hannibal wiped Kerene’s face.

She pulled back, wiping her own eyes.

Hannibal sighed softly, “I’ll make you some tea.” He insisted. “And then we’ll situate you for a good night’s rest.” Standing up, he started for the kitchen.

Kerene continued to stare into the fire, sipping at the glass of water.

Hannibal, in the kitchen, glanced to the door as he let water roll over into a boil. From his cabinet, he pinched a little over 900 mg of sedative herbs into the mix and let it blend well. Straining the tea from the herbs, he poured in some honey and milk. He returned to Kerene, in a sinless manner, he ushered her to drink the tea.

He smiled softly, and sat back in his chair. He watched her sip the tea and gazing into the flames. “What do you plan to do about your living arrangements?”

Kerene shrugged one shoulder, “I don’t know yet. I’m kind of shooting in the dark.”

Hannibal nodded, “You can stay as long as you need to. My home is your home.”

“Thank you.” She sipped, “But I won’t stay here. I can’t do that to you.”

“You are not a burden to me.”

Kerene looked into his fiery eyes.

“I am here for you.”

Her eyes began to tear up to his assertion of safety. She nodded to herself, and stared down at the warm cup in her hands.

It didn’t take a moment more for her drowsiness to settle in. She fought the urge to yawn over and over, but eventually gave in.

Hannibal stared at the side of her complexion. “It’s getting late.” He insisted as he stood, he collected the cup from her hand. “You should rest.”

“I’m not that tired.” She insisted, fighting her own heavy eyelids. She pulled the blankets tightly over her shoulders. “I’m going to stay a little longer.”

Hannibal paused, “Very well then. I’ll situate the bedroom for you.”

Hannibal carried himself up the stairwell, and into the guest bedroom. He began unzipping Kerene’s suitcase and bags, folding them neatly and putting them into the closet and drawers.

Insistent that she stays a while, he'd propped her bag on the top shelf.

He ventured back down the stairwell, and towards the fireplace.

Slumped in the chair, Kerene had managed to close her eyes firmly. Hannibal smiled down at her sleeping form, and began shuffling her into his arms. Carrying her across his chest tightly, her head fell into the crook of his neck.

She stirred only slightly.

Carried up the stairwell, and into the bedroom - Hannibal pulled the blanket to her chin. Kerene looked peaceful, innocent and beautiful. A perfect capsule.

Hannibal brushed back hair behind her ear, and pat her head lightly. Heading for the door, he gazed back into the room before turning off the light and leaving the door open a crack.

He would protect her at all costs.

No matter the loss.

Kerene woke up late into the morning. Slowly rising from the plush bed, she didn't remember ever walking up the stairs to get there. Not putting much thought into it, she got out of bed and into the hall. Following the stairwell, and ventured through the empty rooms.

Hannibal's home was filled with modernistic furniture and artistic pieces. He seemed like an elegant high class but shared the middle class values of comfort and not just owning the most expensive.

She found herself back in the living room, standing before the dead fireplace, a faint memory of the flame in her mind now.

"Good afternoon."

Kerene yelped as she turned, steadying herself with a hand on the mantle as she looked to Hannibal in the doorway, his coat on his arm. " *Jesus."*

"I apologize, I didn't mean to frighten you."

"It's alright." She insisted, the blanket she wore the night before was back on the chair.

"Did you sleep alright?" He asked from the doorway.

"Yeah." She ran a hand through her hair, "I must've slept heavy. I don't even remember going to bed."

“You’ve just been through a rough night. I would’ve expected you to sleep longer, if anything.” He popped up suddenly, “Your phone rang earlier, but I didn’t want to wake you so I took the call. It was your job.”

“Oh, shit.” She now rushed towards Hannibal. “ *Work* .”

“It’s alright. I explained to them your current situation without fine details, and they understand.”

“They do?”

“In fact, I’m friends with the store owner.”

“Small world.”

“Indeed.” He began to unfold his suit jacket from his forearm and put it on. “Before my client at one o’clock, I was hoping we could have breakfast and talk.”

“Talk? Talk about what?”

“Whatever it is you need off your chest.”

“Look, Hannibal-“ she began.

He pressed around her, “I’ll be in the car.” He said over his shoulder before heading for the front door.

Kerene stood stuck, with no other option, she was quick to change and huddle after Hannibal. Helping her in and out of the car, they walked into a nice restaurant and sat in the parlor. Not many people sat around them, and those who did looked as proper as Hannibal.

Kerene was out of place in dark wash jeans and a hoodie.

They had ordered; Hannibal, a steak plate with over easy eggs, and Kerene, a double stack of pancakes with a side of corn hash.

Kerene sat before Hannibal as he sipped his black coffee. She kept her hands folded in her lap, her ankles across, and frantically gazing across the tables.

“You appear anxious.” Hannibal noted. “May I ask why?”

“I don’t want to talk about anything.”

“Then we don’t have to.” He stated.

She squinted at him.

“But bottling up your emotions and putting your agenda on the shelf is a disgraceful way to live.”

“ *You* do it.”

Hannibal watched, “It’s my job. But in the end, my priorities are my clients.”

She curled her hair behind her ear with a heavy sigh.

“As a psychiatrist, I truly can’t tell you what to do. I can only give you options, you determine your progress.”

“And if I never progress?”

“Then you’ll remain in this rut you’ve found yourself in once again.”

Kerene paused, remembering her own words well. With a mistrustful attitude, she averted her gaze.

The food came along, and they began to eat.

Kerene sat on the edge of the world. “My dad and I used to go everywhere when I was a kid.” She admitted.

“Really?”

“He taught me a lot of things.”

“Like what?”

She paused, staring at the steam from Hannibal’s coffee. “He taught me how to tie a knot. How to spot poisonous plants from regular ones. He was really happy when I learned how to string a bow.”

“Did he bring you camping?”

“He.. *We* loved camping. It was the one thing we could really bond over. We had a cabin... in the woods.”

“What happened to it?”

“Even though he passed... it’s not mine to give away. It was his favorite spot.” She raised her shoulders.

“Do you have many good memories there?”

She stared him in the eyes, and he was oblivious. She took a deep breath, and that mental barricade kept everything in. Kerene shook her head. “ *Lots.”*

He could see the struggle in her eyes, the gears turning over and stalling. She was holding back, and he was especially trained in moving things along. “I can sense this is the source of your discomfort. So, I’ll steer us away.” He smiled.

Kerene couldn’t have been more thankful to dodge the bullet.

“What will you do about Will?”

And back on the train tracks she lied. “Give him time and space, I guess.”

Hannibal nodded, “I have an appointment with him later today.”

“I can only assume he’ll talk about the fight and only the fight. He’s always a one-track mind.”

“But *you* are not.” Hannibal cut his rare steak to bits, with cuts of egg. Kerene watched in mesmorization at his skill with the knife. “ *You* have the ability to stop what you’re doing and assess your situations. Will is incapable of controlling his urges and thoughts.”

Kerene leaned her arms onto the table. “Maybe you should tell him that.”

“I’ll consider it.” Hannibal smiled, chewing his food, and gestured to Kerene’s plate. “Eat. I’m sure you’re starving.”

Kerene hadn’t had a proper appetite in some time, or even a full meal. It seemed like she was running on nothing and yet still going. She enjoyed her sugary food until it became too much, and she got her things to go in a little box.

Hannibal guided her along, his phone giving a chirp.

Kerene gazed at his unreadable expression. “Client?”

Hannibal stuffed it away, “No. Colleague.” He helped her into the car and rounded the front, he got in without a word.

“If it’s important, you can just drop me off here. I can manage on my own.”

“I know.” Hannibal started the car regardless. “That’s why I admire you.”

Hannibal ended up leaving Kerene in Maryland to go to work, and Kerene hitched a taxi back to Wolf Trap. Hannibal refused to allow her to pay, so he handed the driver an estimated charge and tip.

Will should be at work, so slipping into the home would be a breeze. That is, if he didn’t take the isolation so horribly.

Will hated being alone.

But Kerene couldn’t put him before her anymore, not when she felt like she was being attacked.

“Wait here.” She told the taxi driver, before heading to the front door. Unlocking it, the snouts of dogs appeared before she could fully open the door.

They greeted her kindly, tails wagging profusely, yipping in happiness. She let them out through the back door, and she turned for the kitchen.

The dinner had been left on the stove.

With a reluctance, she was quick to empty the container and clean it. She set aside the leftovers and put them into the fridge. She hoped none of it had gone bad sitting over the burners. She dried her hands, letting the dogs back in. Picking up things along the way, the newspaper, the mail, her wine glass in the window.

Listening to the silence of the house after a fight was deafening.

She followed up the stairs to her bedroom to find it untouched from when she'd been in it. Packing some more clothes, she looked at the single polaroid from awhile back pinned to the mirror. Plucking it off and sitting on the bed, she smiled softly.

She could remember the day it was taken; a month or so after Kerene and Will had met. They'd tried every other option before settling on being best friends. It was their awkward, intimate phase where they were feeling things out. It was the first time Kerene felt alive, and appreciated by someone. The first time she felt *love* .

Will's bright smile shined through the ink, his glasses askew on his face, and Kerene sitting beside him with her arms around his neck. They looked like the perfect pair. The perfect, disrupted pair.

They made it two years so far, before the knit-picky fights began.

It was too good to be true.

She placed the photo on her dresser and glanced back to her room. With a sigh, she stepped into the hallway where Casper was pushing his way into Will's room.

"Hey." She whistled, "Come on. Out. *Out* ." She snapped her fingers, pushing the door open further. She stared at Will's insentient body knocked out cold on the floor, lying on his stomach. "Will?" She rushed to his side, flipping him onto his back. "Will?" She tapped his face lightly, " *Hey.* " She checked for breathing, and his pulse. "Will. Wake up."

Casper leaned over, licking Will's face.

"Not now, Cas." Kerene pushed him away. "Go downstairs. Go."

Casper left the room to sit in the hallway.

"Will?" Kerene rubbed his chest gently, "Wake up, okay? You got'ta wake up." She stroked his curls off his forehead. "Wake up *Will."* She said softly, cupping his face. The panic began to set in, her hands shaking. " *Will.* Come on, *Will."* She begged.

Will's brow furrowed gently.

Kerene gasped, pressing her forehead against his warm skin. "Thank god." She sobbed.

Will opened his eyes, blinking before Kerene came into focus. “Kerene?” He called.

“I’m here.” She stroked his face. “I’m here, Will.”

“Is it really you?”

Not-Kerene gazed in the fog behind Kerene, kneeling over her knees to look down at him in dissatisfaction.

“It’s me.” She insisted. “Are you hurt? Can you sit up?”

Carefully, Kerene brought Will to a seated position, sitting with her hand on his back and chest.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know.” Will touched his forehead. “I must’ve- passed out.”

“Of course, you passed out.” Not-Kerene teased. *“You were so worried about little ol’ Kerene not coming back, that you had a panic attack.”*

“Is your head okay?” Kerene touched the back of his head gently.

“It doesn’t hurt.” He gently pulled her hand from his forehead. “What’re you doing here? I thought... I thought you hated me.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t hate you, Will.” She combed her fingers through his hair, “I was just hurt by what you said. I needed to be away. And I was thinking about it on the way here, on how upset your words made me.”

Will stared down, “I don’t expect you to forgive me-.”

“I forgive you.”

Will looked at her in shock.

“I will always forgive you.”

He lowered his head, and she picked it back up to look into his eyes.

“Every time you hurt me, I’ve always come back... because we need each other. We make each other *feel* something, no matter how low or numb we are inside.” Kerene sighed, “But we need space. Not for forever. Just... for now.”

Will held her wrist tenderly, shutting his eyes. Her skin felt warm, and soft against his fingertips.

“Did you eat?” She asked suddenly.

Kerene cooked Will breakfast, and they sat at the table together. Kerene sat with a cup of coffee as Will ate his food with a glass of water. Sat in silence, avoiding conversation, they kept their eyes to each other's dish.

Kerene looked to the window, scattered clouds drifting over the sky.

Will sat back in his chair.

Kerene took a deep breath and exhaled out of her nose. "I'm sure the school is wondering where you are."

"Probably." Will nodded.

"You should tell them."

He scoffed, "Tell them what? I had a rough night? Panic attacks aren't exactly excusable in the real world."

"They should make an exception then."

"Right." Will forked the rest of his eggs into his mouth, and set down his utensils. "What now?"

Kerene shrugged. "I don't know. I mean," she looked to the kitchen, "I don't want you to be alone, Will. But sometimes being around you is..." she paused to find the word.

"A burden. I get it."

"You're not a burden-"

"I didn't say I was a burden; I was insisting my actions towards you are *burdening* ." He kept his head tucked down. "But... if that's how I am-."

"We both feel things."

Kerene's words seemed to be enough to answer for it.

"I think we revolve around each other too much, and we've become too much alike. So, we butt heads."

"Is this a *it's me, not you* kind of deal?" Will chuckled. Humor was his defense, Kerene was not surprised.

"We have this constant cycle of putting the other before ourselves, and it's not healthy in the way *we* do it. We have to set our priorities."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

He nodded. “More space. Got it.”

Kerene stared at him, and cast her eyes down. “I really don’t want you to be alone, Will. It’s bad enough I found you passed out on the floor this time. What if the next time I find you like that, you aren’t breathing? I don’t think I can handle burying another person.”

He nodded, “I understand.”

She stared.

“I do. You can rest assured, I’ll try better. I’ll *do* better.”

Not-Kerene sat before him, gazing into his eyes with a dead gaze. *“Are you capable of that? Or is it just easier to lie to her, than to tear her down with another hurtful but true confession?”*

Will rubbed his eyes, “I must’ve not gotten any sleep.” He chuckled, “I’m still tired.”

Kerene nodded, “I should go.” She stood.

“Yeah.”

“My cab’s probably gone by now. I forgot about it.”

“I hope you paid him first.” He joked.

“I don’t remember. It’s been... It’s been *a* morning.”

“I’ll walk you to the door.” He insisted, reluctantly standing and following behind her.

“Are you going to be okay with this? Being alone again? Just you and me?”

“Did you call out of work today?” Will asked as they waited on the porch for the next available cab to drive their way.

“Uh, yeah. I kind of woke up late too. I missed the call, but Hannibal made sure everything was okay.”

Will nodded, “Hannibal.”

Kerene sighed, “I’m sorry I never told you about Hannibal and I.”

“It’s fine.” He waved off. “I shouldn’t have been so... *Angry.”*

“I was going to tell you, but it was never the right time. Everything just kept piling, so I put it on the back burner for a while.”

“How long have you and Hannibal...” He gestured.

“We’re...” she paused, “We’re not together. I hope you know that.”

Will paused. “You’re-?”

Kerene laughed, “Oh, my god. No.” She shut her eyes, shaking her head, “No. No. We’re not *together* together. Oh, god. Ew.”

Will now began to laugh.

“We’re just friends.”

“Okay.” Will sighed, “I... I didn’t read the room right.”

“Apparently.” Kerene shook off the embarrassment, but her face was still warm.

“So... when *did* you become friends?” He asked regardless.

“A little after he’d invited us to dinner. I met him again. I *went* to his office.”

“You went to Maryland?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

She shrugged softly, “I wanted to see if I could get help.” She said slowly.

An expression passed over Will’s face she’d never seen before, something of a blend of shock and gratitude. “You did?”

Kerene leaned against the railing, “I want... help?”

Will stared over the lawn and the road leading to the main road. “Wow.”

Kerene gazed out too. “Yeah.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“You are?”

“Yeah.” He smiled.

Kerene smiled back. “Thanks.”

They fell back into a momentary silence before the whining of the dogs bothered them enough to let them roam free. They sat on the steps.

“How’s the medication?” Kerene asked.

“It’s... it’s a slow journey.”

“Still having nightmares?”

“Yeah.”

She nodded, “Me too.”

“I could give you some.” He joked.

“It’s alright. I think I can manage on my own for a bit.”

Will stared at the side of her face, this beautiful woman stood in front of him strong, and he couldn’t even get a grip on himself. He admired her features before she turned to look at him with a lingering smile, Will turned away.

“What do you think we should do for Thanksgiving?” Kerene asked.

“You want to break tradition?”

“Why not? I mean, how good can TV dinners and beer be for the second year in a row?”

Will laughed, “You’re right.”

“I always am.” She teased, knocking their shoulders together.

Will nudged back.

The cab wasn’t much longer, pulling up to the home, and waiting for Kerene. She lingered on the bottom step, looking up at Will.

“Don’t go too far into the dark.” She warned.

“If I do, I’ll call.”

Kerene nodded, “See ya’ Will.”

Will raised his hand to wave, and Kerene took for the taxi.

“Leaving again?” Not-Kerene stepped into the corner of his sight, facing Will. but watching Kerene.

“It’s for the best.”

“Do you really think so? She’s a lamb sitting in a lion’s den. You know it more than anything.”

“Hannibal will keep her safe.”

Kerene looked back and waved with a smile from the taxi. Will did the same.

“I’m in the deepest parts of your head.” Not-Kerene whispered closely to Will’s ear, enough to feel the phantom dead lips against his earlobe. “ *We know that isn’t true.”*

Will looked down at *Not-Kerene* and back to the taxi driving away. With a tightly set jaw, he couldn't help but feel helpless in his own mind.

Before anyone knew it, the Thanksgiving holiday had come along.

Will and Kerene had kept their distance, but joined each other for lunch on most days. It was the highlight of their week, though neither would verbally agree.

Hannibal allowed Kerene to stay in his home, and neither had spoken about deep, meaningful things.

It was a casual arrangement.

The morning of Thanksgiving, Hannibal had been in the kitchen, as he always was. With the apron tied around himself, he was deep at work.

Kerene walked in to the smell of fresh veggies and spices. "Good morning."

Hannibal smiled at her. "Good morning, *sunshine* ."

"Sunshine?" She questioned.

"You don't like it?"

"No one's called me *sunshine* since I was a kid." She leaned her arms on the counter. "In pre-school."

"How're your culinary skills?"

"You know how my skills are. I made a dish, remember? *Au Coq*- whatever."

" *Coq Au Vin."*

"Right. That."

"Care to assist me?" He gestured. "The potatoes need peeling, and the peppers need to be minced."

"What would you do without me?" She mocked, moving to the sink to wash her hands. "What do you normally do for Thanksgiving? Do you have any friends?"

"That's a hurtful question for someone not wielding the knife." He teased as she turned to the cutting board.

"It's just a question."

Hannibal smirked. "I invite my closest colleagues or friends for dinner."

“How many people do you feed?”

“It depends on the year. Sometimes I make enemies out of friends.”

“Don’t we all?” Kerene continued to mince the peppers, deep in the process.

“You know, you’re more than welcome to join.”

“I don’t know. Will and I always had Thanksgiving together. We never really had anyone, only each other.”

“Break tradition.”

“That’s what he said.” She scoffed.

“Well, you’re welcome in my home, so you’re welcome to stay for Thanksgiving.”

“Thanks.”

Hannibal smiled, looking at her cutting. “I wouldn’t trust you with a knife if you were slicing bread.” He mocked.

She pointed the tip of the blade at him, “That’s a hurtful comment for someone not wielding the knife.”

He put his hands up, “I yield.”

Kerene shook her head, examining him, she returned to focusing on cutting.

Things had been a little stranger ever since she’d occupied Hannibal’s guest bedroom. Being practical strangers, she had this inkling to remain as far as possible from him, but also wanting to get to know him so they *weren’t* strangers anymore. There were odd moments where they’d watch each other for too long, or smile in each other’s presence, and jokingly nudge each other.

Kerene was not entirely innocent of it.

Hannibal had this bizarre charm to his way of being, and Kerene couldn’t put her finger on it. Was he always this fascinating?

When all had been rinsed again and chopped, Hannibal took over the cooking as Kerene watched.

“What were your Thanksgiving’s like before?” Kerene asked.

“Before what?”

“Before you moved.”

“Poor.” He stated. “But my parents did their best to support the family they’d raised.”

“You were the youngest?”

“Yes.”

“I’m an only child.” She stated, “You can imagine how lonely that got.”

“I can.” He gazed.

She remembered his comment about his sister who’d passed. “What was her name?”

Hannibal stopped.

“I’m sorry, that was inappropriate. It’s none of my business-”

“No, it’s alright. I’ve already buried it.” He insisted. “Her name was Mischa. From what my mother said, she was strong. She didn’t have a thread of naivety in her.”

Kerene smiled.

“She picked up on things well, and she knew when to listen and when to speak. She would’ve been something great someday.” Hannibal turned away to preheat the oven. “You’re like her in a way.”

“I don’t have a strand of naivety?”

“No. You were born for something great.” Hannibal turned from the oven and leaned his palms on the countertop.

Kerene pulled back.

“Someday, you’ll rise to that potential. Until then,” he began cleaning. “You’ll have to learn to float before you can swim the channel.”

“Learn to float?” She scoffed.

“Learn to control your emotions, to differentiate between realities and circumstances, and to further understand the consequences to your actions.”

“I think I can already do most of that.”

“Are you positive?”

Kerene hesitated on the affirmation too long, and Hannibal was proven right.

“We’ll talk more about it later.” He turned with a smile, “Now, *dessert.”*

They'd rolled out crust and fillings, making a pair of pies for the guests, and chilled them until the dinner would commence.

Kerene neglected the time, and didn't realize she was missing lunch with Will until noon had come. She grabbed her jacket, rushing for the door.

"Leaving?" Hannibal leaned out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his towel.

"I'm meeting Will for lunch. I'll be back later for dinner."

"Will is welcome to dinner as well."

"I'll let him know." She opened the door, "Bye!" She chimed, shutting the door between them.

Hannibal neared the front door, watching Kerene get into a cab, and the cab taking off. Locking the door, he moved back into the kitchen to prepare a second hunk of meat. This one came off of a crooked lawyer; Hannibal would flatten his lungs with a meat cleaver, filet them, and tie them with rosemary in the folds.

It would make for a delicious addition beside the turkey.

Once Hannibal had sanitized his surfaces and all food had been prepared and ready for cooking, he began setting the dining room up.

This Thanksgiving would be just wonderful.

"There are so many cars." Kerene commented.

"I don't think they're all here for Hannibal's dinner." Will insisted.

"Could you imagine?" Kerene guffawed as they entered through the front door of Hannibal's home. Laughter and chatter could be heard at a distance.

Upon entering the living room, Kerene and Will felt like a pair of sheep among wolves. All those in the room were elegantly dressed, pearls around their necks, and pocket squares poised. Will cleared his throat, lowering his head, and pushed his glasses up his nose. Kerene's eyes panned around the room until they'd found Hannibal, he spoke with another gentleman in a fine suit, a wine glass in one hand and the other in his pocket casually.

He turned his attention to Kerene in the doorway and smiled.

Kerene smiled back, raising her hand in a wave, and Will's attention diverted to her gaze. He glanced between the two, nodding his head as Hannibal greeted him from across the room as well.

“Come on.” Kerene pulled Will by the cuff, and they moved through the crowd saying awkward *hello’s* and *hi’s* as she excused herself passed strangers.

“I don’t think I see a single face I know.”

“Neither do I.” Kerene grabbed a bottle of wine, pouring two glasses. “Then again, we never got around to making friends in Wolf Trap.” She offered out the glass, and Will declined. “Medication, right.” She sighed.

Will nodded, distinctly knowing Kerene doesn’t take hers. He glanced at his shoes a moment as she leaned over grabbing a skewered cheese and ham sample someone had brought along. “I never really ask,” he began.

Kerene met his gaze.

“How is it? Staying here? Are you alright?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged, “It’s a new place, it’s open, and though it’s not home but - it feels nice.”

Will nodded.

“Nowhere will ever be like the farmhouse.”

Will studied her truthful eyes.

“I *do* miss it.”

He made no moves to offer her room back to her, he hasn’t touched a single thing. He may have stood in the doorway a few times, wondering what she would be doing in that exact moment but that was all. He didn’t trek into that part of the house, it wasn’t his.

“But I’ve been getting better.”

“I’m glad.” Will nodded. He turned away, “I’m going to find the bathroom.”

“Oh, it’s down the hall that way. I could show you.” She pointed.

“I think I can manage.” He smiled, “Don’t let me stop you.”

Kerene furrowed her brow at him, and watched him walk off. She didn’t know what might have set him off, maybe that she’d missed the home or that she felt comfortable in someone else’s.

“Enjoying ourselves?”

Kerene turned to Hannibal. “Yes.” She held up the glass of wine. “This is good.”

“Aged for over eighty years. You have good taste.”

She pointed to herself, “What can I say? Recovering alcoholic.”

The joke, the second time around, made Hannibal chuckle.

“Who are all these people?”

They overlooked the crowd of mingling people.

“Colleagues. Friends of friends. Even old patients.”

“Old patients? You keep in contact with your patients?”

“Only those who I could trust.” He gestured. “Some of them invited themselves.”

“That’s not very hospitable.”

“What can I do?” Hannibal shrugged. “Besides, I’ve made more than enough to go around.”

Kerene looked into the oven, “You made something else?”

“A little something on the side. A favored dish.” He glanced at Kerene. “You wouldn’t be interested.”

“You read my mind.” She grimaced.

Hannibal looked around the room. “Where’s Will?”

“He went to the bathroom. He’ll be back a moment, I’m sure.”

“Well, would you do me the honors and help serve the table?”

She looked at her imaginary watch. “I guess I have time.”

Hannibal smiled as he propped dishes in her hand, and they ventured back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room. People began to mumble about the delicious smell of food, and ushering to the dining room to seat themselves.

Will had yet to appear.

“Excuse me, have you seen the man I walked in with?” Kerene asked.

“No, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Kerene walked towards the bathroom, knocking gently. “Will? You alright?”

Hannibal spotted her, but she didn’t see him.

“Will?” She tried the knob, and the door was unlocked. She pushed the door open. “Will?”

Will was not in the bathroom.

She peered down the hall. Entering the kitchen again, she came across Hannibal. “Have you seen Will?”

“I believe he went to rest for a moment.” Hannibal stated. “He said he was a little dizzy, so I brought him upstairs.”

“I should check on him-“

“He’ll be alright.” Hannibal held out a plate of corn, carrots, and greens. “Here, take this, and bring it to the table.”

Kerene paused in her spot.

“I’ll check on Will. Please, finish the table.” He excused himself out of the door and up the stairs.

Kerene seated herself aside at the head of the table, and sat in worry. Those around her doing the same for Hannibal.

“Where’s Lecter?” People questioned.

“I hope he didn’t run off on us.” They joked.

Kerene felt out of the loop. Like she didn’t belong.

Hannibal had opened the guest bedroom door, Will sat up on the bed with his head in his hands. Hannibal found him in the hallway disassociating, he was quick to move him out of sight.

“How are you feeling, Will?”

“Like my head’s on too tight.” He scoffed.

“Let me see.” Hannibal tilted his head gently, gazing into his eyes. With a light from the bedside drawer, he flashed it over his eyes.

One of Will’s eyes was experiencing an abnormal miosis, refusing to widen to light.

“Any pains? Aches? Or discomfort?”

“I feel *hot.”*

Hannibal pressed the back of his hand to Will’s forehead, “You’re burning up.” He stepped aside, replacing the light. “Have you experienced any discomfort to this level in the past week?”

Will shook his head, “No. No.”

“I’m going to ask you to rest for a bit. I’ll get you some tea, it’ll help with the discomfort. I’m sure you have a headache.”

Now that Hannibal had brought it forth, he was experiencing a minor migraine.

“Lay back.” Hannibal instructed and Will did so. Hannibal shut the door behind him and ventured back downstairs, he was quick to move through the kitchen and put water on the stove to boil. He glanced into the buzzing dining room, spotting Kerene sitting anxiously by his seat.

He smiled.

When the water had come to a boil, he dropped in over 1000mg of his Valerian root, and strained it. He dropped in honey and hurried out of sight.

Kerene looked to the crowd and Will’s empty placemat across from her.

“Here you are.” Hannibal held the cup over Will, and he slowly sat up. “Drink it slowly, while it’s still hot.”

Will sipped and burned himself.

“Drink the whole thing and lie back down.”

“Where’s Kerene?” Will called.

Hannibal paused. “She’s downstairs.”

“She’s probably worried about me.”

“Kerene understands the situation.”

“She does?”

“She insists you get some rest since you’re feeling sick.”

Will nodded.

“If you need anything, give me a call.”

Before he could say anything else, Hannibal shut the door behind him and ventured back downstairs.

Will drank down the tea, and sat back.

“Do you really think now’s a good time to go to sleep?” Not-Kerene lied on the bed, propped up on her elbow. *“I mean, you did just faint in the bathroom. It was a good thing Hannibal found you.”*

Will clenched his eyelids tightly, “Go away.”

“Oh, I’ll go away. But when you need me to cope, to keep out the other voices telling you to kill, to really be the monster you are, then you’ll want me back. When Kerene is gone, you’ll want me back so that you never forget her.”

“She’s not going anywhere.”

“ *That’s what you think. But you drove her away. And now Hannibal has her, what do you think he’ll do with her? Hm? Do you think they’re in love?”*

“Shut up.” Will sat up.

The room took a spin.

“ *You don’t look so good, Will.” Not-Kerene* grabbed at his shoulders, his body falling back into the bed. “ *Why don’t you sit down?”*

The bed gave way, and he sunk deep into the mattress. It swallowed him whole, and for a moment it felt like every part of his lungs was stuffed with cotton. Like he was being suffocated with a pillow.

He gasped.

“Will?” Kerene clasped his hand. “You okay?”

He looked around the dinner table. They’d all stopped eating, and watched him. “Yeah.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded.

“I’d like to make a toast.” Hannibal cleared his throat and stood. “I’m grateful you could all join me on this fine evening. There are a few friendly faces I haven’t seen in quite a while.” He smiled. “I’d like to say I’m grateful for you all, and having met you, and shared both pleasant and undesirable evenings with you all.”

The table laughed.

Will did not.

“Most importantly, I am grateful for both my close friends who joined me today.” He looked down at Kerene and Will. “You have inspired me to see in a new light, and have given me obstacles to overcome and approach in new ways.”

Kerene smiled up at Hannibal with a light in her eyes.

Will watched her.

“To family and friends.” Hannibal raised his glass.

The table raised their glasses, and joined cups and glasses to celebrate.

“I’d like to make a toast as well.”

The table turned to the opposing side of the table, Will had to turn his eyes from Kerene’s unforgettable, prideful expression.

“I’d like to thank Will Graham for killing me.”

Will met the eyes of the deceased Garrett Jacob-Hobbs. His heart stopped.

“Now I live rent-free in that head of his. A place where I can never die.”

Beside him, his daughter Abigail Hobbs sat, her throat split open, blood spewing down her chest. She sat in a content manner, a calm smile on her face.

“To Will.” Raised the glass of Arthur-James Theordore, the man who’d acquired alien-hand syndrome and kept Kerene hostage. He passed away from a severe heart attack.

“To Will.” Said Georgia Madchen, a woman who suffered Cotard’s syndrome, believing she was dead. She was shot trying to escape police custody, and Will felt guilty for her life.

“To Will.” Smiled Eliot Budish, the serial killer who skinned the backs of his victims in order to make wings for them and create angels out of them, believing he was doing God’s work.

“To Will.” Said Ivory Paine, the woman who just wanted to take a jog in the countryside in the morning. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Kerene and Hannibal sat beside him.

Will looked to Kerene, and she held her glass up.

“To Will. For letting me leave that house I hated so much, and allowing me to see how easy life is now.” She clasped her hand over Hannibal’s forearm.

Hannibal pat her hand.

They all banged their cups, broken, and laughed at their shattered glasses. Blood dripping over broken glass, wine spilt all over the table, and dead skin and feces fell from the deceased bodies.

Will tried to pull away, but his feet sunk into the ground. He began to shrink.

Kerene and Hannibal leaned over, watching him become so small, and even so much as smiling. “Good riddance.” Hannibal mumbled.

Kerene waved as Will sunk into the floor.

He shut his eyes tightly, and the pressure on his chest forced him to gasp. He couldn’t move, couldn’t open his eyes, couldn’t scream.

He was paralyzed.

And no one would hear him.

Kerene had her appetite taken from her when Hannibal came back down from the stairwell, and served everyone. Hannibal glanced at her, but did his best to promote her to eat. He was a good host, offering refills of wine and water and having good conversations.

But when it came to Kerene, she ran short.

When most of the guests had finished eating, and dessert was served, Kerene put together a plate of food.

“You haven’t even finished your first plate.” Remarked Hannibal walking into the kitchen.

“It’s not for me. It’s for Will.”

“ I didn’t want to further ruin your dinner, but Will’s gone home .”

“What?”

“He had some rest and said he still wasn‘t feeling well. He said you would understand.”

“No. I don’t. Why didn’t he call me?” Kerene reached for her phone.

“I called him a cab a while ago. He’s probably sleeping at home by now. I wouldn’t bother him.”

Kerene sighed. “Something was up with him earlier.”

“What did you two speak about?”

“Nothing.” She shrugged, “Maybe it was something I said?”

“Will is a sensitive person. But I’m sure he’ll be alright. He’ll call in the morning.” He stated. “Help me with the other desserts.”

Reluctantly tucking her phone away, she brought out the other plates, and lingered by the door. She hesitated but stood on the front porch, her phone to her ear as she called Will.

“Pick up.” Kerene huffed.

Hannibal, in the guest bedroom, glanced at the ringing phone. He turned it over.

Kerene stopped pacing when the phone went to voicemail. “I don’t know where you are Will, but you could’ve let me know you were leaving. I was worried; you’d gotten sick suddenly, and I didn’t know what to think. But call me. Or text me. *Something* .” She hung up.

Hannibal stepped away from the front door as he passed.

Kerene entered, glancing at him, and shut the door behind her.

“Is the air nice out?”

“Cold.”

“I’ve set the fire in the living room. Go sit by it.”

“If it’s alright, I’m going to go to bed.”

“So soon?”

“All the socializing tired me out.”

Hannibal found her lie humorous but inclined her anyways. “Good night then.”

“Good night.” She started up the stairs.

“Kerene?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sure whatever Will is going through, he’ll be fine.”

“I hope so.” Kerene hummed as she walked up the stairs and into her room. With her back to the door, she sighed heavily. “Why would he just leave,” she asked herself. She chucked her phone onto the bed and flopped down with her hands over her face. Turning over, she tried not to think about it too much.

Maybe he was sick and he just wanted to fix it himself. But a little *I’m leaving* would’ve been more than efficient.

She shut her eyes, trying to find sleep restlessly.

Meanwhile, in the very next room, Will’s eyelids continued to flicker. He would eventually slip into his subconscious; he wouldn’t remember even a single detail of his paralysis.

When the last pair had left the dinner party, Hannibal began cleaning alone. He’d washed every dish, removed the table cloth, and sanitized every surface. Once the kitchen and dining room was spotless, he ventured to the stairwell.

He opened Kerene’s door, the hallway light peering in, and he stood at the foot of the bed. His eyes fell over the frail frame of Kerene, her chest rising and falling gently as she clutched the blanket.

He smiled down at her.

He shut the door behind himself quietly and stepped into the next room. Hannibal made quick of Will’s sedated state. Carrying him out to the car, he drove him back to Wolf Trap. Handling him carefully, he removed his coat, his shoes, and pants. Tucking him into bed as if he’d done it himself, Hannibal hung his clothes aside. He made sure to delete his voicemail.

Casper, the Alentejo, watched Hannibal's every move.

Hannibal gazed down at him in the hallway, and looked to the door he was guarding well. As Hannibal exited Will's room, he lingered before the dog. "Are you going to be defiant too?" He questioned.

Casper gazed at him, and huddled away with his tail between his legs.

Hannibal opened the bedroom door, and peered in.

The room was very much like Will, the home was mainly Will's, but there were pieces of it that shouted *Kerene.* Like her need to doodle on tiny corners of the wooden desk chair she had, or the pieces of jewelry she never wore but kept around for occasions, or the stray sock that had fallen off from when she was asleep. Hannibal liked being in the room because it was like getting a glimpse into her head, into who she really was.

He sat down on the bed, the dresser just across, and he gazed at himself through the mirror.

He looked content, like he fit in this room.

Standing once again, he looked to the dresser. A polaroid sat on the corner of it, he picked it up, and gazed down at it. Kerene sat in the frame with her arms around Will's neck, his glasses skewed on his face, and yet - they were the token pair.

He brushed his finger over Kerene on the film.

Hannibal tucked the photo into his inner pocket, and stepped out of the room.

He would return to Baltimore, and no one would know a thing. No one would know he stepped over boundaries to get what he wanted. No one would have a clue that he drove through the night just to get back home. No one would realize the photo was missing.

And the world kept on turning, with Hannibal at it's mercy.

Chapter End Notes

Take care, be safe, and be kind. :) See you next month.

Compromise.

Chapter Notes

Aye! A new month, a new update. :) A little late but anyways, I've been working on other things besides this project. Thank you for being patient regardless, and thank you for the comments. :) Without further interruption, enjoy, take care, and be safe. :)

Trigger warning: depictions of graphic violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, Kerene said nothing about Will.

Hannibal had been making breakfast, and humming as he went along. The familiar song rang in Kerene's ears as she stared at her phone. She wondered if Will had gotten her voicemail, and if he was just ignoring it now.

"Is something wrong?" Hannibal asked.

Kerene looked up. "No."

Hannibal hummed in disbelief. "How did you sleep?"

"I've got to get to work." Kerene said. "Okay?"

"Okay."

"See ya'." Kerene skipped breakfast, and ducked out.

Hannibal raised his eyebrows, and served himself.

Kerene checked her phone on the way to work, the taxi avoiding some of the major traffic out of Maryland. She had no response from Will yet. Tucking her phone away, she sighed, leaning her head against the window.

Will slowly opened his eyes, his face wet with sweat. His head wasn't screwed on so tight anymore, but his muscles felt heavy. He slowly turned his head, craning his neck to see the alarm clock on his nightstand.

7 o'clock.

He shut his eyes again, and slowly rose out of bed. He stared down at himself a moment.

The last thing he remembered was the party at Hannibal's, how did he get home? Did he black out? Did he drink? No, if he drank then he'd have to throw up the wine he swallowed.

He felt fine.

Slowly, he crossed the hall into the bathroom and leaned over the sink. He stared himself in the face, and into his own eyes. The bags under his eyes were dark, looming like he'd been resurrected from the depths of Hell.

He'd managed to get to his phone again, and noticed the missed calls from both the school and one from Kerene the night before. He furrowed his brow in confusion, never remembering if he answered the call or not. His brain felt like it was scrambled.

He called the school, expressing his sickness, and they excused him. He then moved to call Kerene.

"Are you sure you want to do that?"

Will met *Not-Kerene's* eyes *,* "Yes."

"Do you even know how you got home last night?"

He pressed the phone to his ear.

"There's this blank, isn't there? A point where you don't remember what happened, from then to now."

"Shut up."

"Do you think she'll pick up?"

Will listened to the ringing.

"Do you think she's angry?"

"Shut up." He yelled.

The ringing stopped.

"Kerene?" He called.

There wasn't a single sound on the other end of the phone.

"Kerene?" He shut his eyes, feeling a wave of nausea. "Look, I know.. I did something last night. And I'm sorry."

"What did you do?"

He grit his teeth, ”I’m not right in the head right now. I feel *sick.* I.. I think it’s the medication. So, whatever I did,” he paused, meeting *Not-Kerene’s* eyes, “I’m sorry.”

Not-Kerene walked out of his sight with a leering expression.

Will felt like he had a moment to breathe. “Meet me for lunch. The usual place?”

The phone went dead.

“Kerene?” He stared at his phone.

What did he do?

Will found himself standing in front of the restaurant Kerene and himself usually sat at for lunch. He paced, feeling nervous, like a drug user needing a fix. He felt off his rocker.

“ *Do you even think she’ll show?”*

Will shook his head, trying to shut the voice out.

Not-Kerene leaned against the window, her hands behind her back, watching him pace. “ *I think she’ll ditch us. There’s better things to do than to baby you.”*

Will tightly held his head, shutting his eyes, and grimaced. It felt like his brain was on fire, he felt like he was suffering a cold sweat.

“I bet she’s at work right now, looking at the time, and laughing. She knows you’ll be here, and she doesn’t care.”

Will groaned in discomfort, and shook his head. “No.”

“Yes. You’re alone, Will. All of the world, and you’re alone.”

Will let his hands drop, dizziness taking over.

“Will.”

He took a slow breath.

“Will?”

He opened his eyes.

Not-Kerene had vanished. Kerene stood before him. “What’re you doing?” In confusion, Kerene stared at him.

Will turned, and realized he'd been outside the restaurant for a while now. "I.. I was waiting for you."

Kerene nodded slowly. "Okay. Well. I'm here."

Will gulped, his throat suddenly dry, sweat still trickling down his neck. "Uh." He swayed on his feet.

Kerene noticed his physical state. "Are you okay? Hannibal said you were feeling sick."

"It's.. I think it's the medication. I don't *feel* right." He gestured to himself. "I feel like I'm losing my mind."

"You're adjusting to the medication-"

"No. No." He shook his head, "I feel worse. So much worse."

"Maybe you should sit down." She opened the door to the restaurant, "Come on."

He ushered in and she followed, they found themselves in their usual seating, and Will's paranoia had hoisted itself up to an eleven.

Kerene eyed Will's sweaty state. "Now, tell me, what is going on with you?"

Will leaned forward, as if to be chary of someone listening in on their conversation. "I feel like ever since I started the medication, things got good, and then they got bad."

"You're adjusting to new medication. It happened to me. It's happening to you now-"

"No. No." Will shook his head, "You aren't listening to me."

"I am listening to you, and you sound like you're paranoid. Like someone is out to get you. You're having an episode."

"I know when I'm having an episode, and when I'm not. I'm not crazy. I'm *not* ."

Kerene raised an eyebrow at him.

"Okay. Okay." He sat back, glancing around the restaurant. "I might not be right in the head, but I'm not crazy. I *feel* like my head is on fire . Like my.. Like there's an itch in my.. *brain* that I can't scratch." He said with much aggravation, trying to force words over his tongue with difficulty, putting his hand up to his head like a claw, trying to keep himself from scratching. "It keeps me awake. I can't sleep, I can't eat, and sometimes it feels like I can't breathe-"

"You're going to work yourself up into a panic attack. *Breathe-* "

"I can't." He muttered.

“Even she sees you as you are. A monster on the verge of insanity.” Not-Kerene hung over the back of Kerene’s chair.

Will shut his eyes. “I keep seeing things, things I know that aren’t there. Or.. I think they aren’t there.”

Kerene furrowed her brow. “Did you tell Hannibal these things?”

He shook his head.

“I need you to tell Hannibal. He can help you.”

“He has her pressed under his thumb. Believing everything he says.” Not-Kerene leaned down, her head level beside Kerene’s. *“His little angel.”*

“He can help you get the right medication. The right dose, and it’ll make everything go away.”

Will shook his head with a heavy grimace.

Kerene could see Will’s health was declining, she just didn’t think it’d fallen so low. “What do you see?”

Will looked between the two in front of him.

“You said you see things. Like what?”

“The cases. I still see them. It’s like they never went away.”

“The people who died?”

He nodded.

“That’s it?”

“Tell her you see me.” Not-Kerene looked at the side of Kerene’s face, *“Tell her you see us.”*

Will nodded.

“You feel guilty for their deaths, I know, you’ve told me. But you don’t have to carry that weight.” Kerene glanced between his eyes. “You have to tell Hannibal about these things, he can help-”

“No one can help me.”

“That’s not true.”

Will shut his eyes, rubbing them roughly. “Why is this happening to me?” He cried.

“Will.” Kerene leaned forward, “I need you to open your eyes. I need you to look at me.”

Will clenched his hands into fists against his eyes.

“Look at me, *please* .”

“ *Open them.”*

Will opened his eyes, and before him was the dinner table at Thanksgiving. Every person he’d once encountered, killed, couldn’t save sat around watching him. Kerene standing at the head of the table behind Hannibal to his right with that smug smile.

“No. No. *No.”* Will shut his eyes again.

“Will.”

Will felt the room spinning again.

“ *Will.”*

The floor was swallowing him whole, and the room watched as he vanished.

“ *Will.”*

The world faded to black.

Will’s unconscious body fell out of the chair to the floor, and Kerene lunged forward with a startled scream. She lifted him, cradling his head. “Will?” She muttered. “Will.” She panicked, patting his face. “ *Help.”* She began to cry out, “Someone call an ambulance! Please!”

The restaurant filled with sound, everyone cleared the area surrounding Will and Kerene. They gazed at the scene, whispering among themselves, panicking secondhand.

Kerene continued to stroke Will’s damp face, and tried to contain her trembling. “Don’t do this to me, Will. I need you.” She sobbed quietly. “ *I need you* .”

“ *I need you.”*

Will opened his eyes slowly, and he was back at home. He had no memory of getting there, or if he’d even brought himself to bed. Slowly, he looked over his shoulder to the alarm on his nightstand.

5:28 am.

Kerene was probably on her morning jog.

He’d beat her to the coffee machine, and make her a cup.

Will made his way slowly down the stairs, the dogs sitting in the front room, lulling in and out of consciousness in the morning hues.

Casper looked to Will with a somber expression, his head resting on his front paws as Will began the coffee machine.

The front door opened; Kerene stepped in.

“Morning.” He mumbled.

“Morning.” Kerene hummed, “You’re up early.”

“So are you.”

“I always am.” She grabbed her cup, waiting for the coffee. “Rough time sleeping?”

“Actually. It was alright. I don’t remember going to bed, but.. I slept okay.”

“That’s good.” Kerene nodded.

They shared comfortable silence as they poured their cups of coffee, and passed the cream and sugar between each other. Will watched Kerene pour her cream into the cup.

“You have therapy later?”

“Yeah, after class.”

“I’ll drop you off.” Kerene leaned her back against the counter. “Candi’s letting me borrow her car again. She’s going to meet the in-laws .”

Will hummed, sipping at his coffee, and wincing. He stared into his coffee cup, somehow getting grinds in the mix. “Shit.” He huffed, “I messed up the coffee.”

“It’s okay.” Kerene insisted. “I’ll just pick up coffee on the way.” She set down the cup, and turned for the hall. “Be ready in ten.” She reminded.

Will furrowed his brow, still staring at his cup of coffee. “Wait.”

Kerene turned, “Yeah?”

“Candi’s meeting her in-laws?”

“Yeah. They’re in Maine, remember?”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah. I remember.”

Kerene stared, “You feeling okay?”

“Yeah.” Will set down his cup.

“Do you need to call out of work?”

“No, I’m fine. Just,” he paused, “I thought Candi went to meet her girlfriend’s parents back in August.”

It was Kerene’s turn to stare in confusion, “No. This is the first time she’s going up there.”

“What day is it?”

Kerene laughed, “I think I should call out for you. You look a little pale. I’ll call the school-”

“What day is it, really?”

Kerene pushed, “You’re kidding me, right? Are you on your meds?”

Will looked around the room, the ticking of the clocks were audible from the living room. He slanted his eyes at Kerene. “This isn’t real.”

Kerene shook her head.

The facade dropped.

“ *You got me.* ”

Will’s expression frantically turned to horror.

Not-Kerene smiled, shrugging her shoulders, and holding her hands up. “ *I had you in the first half. What gave it away?”*

Will glared. “I don’t live with Kerene anymore.”

Not-Kerene nodded.

“And Kerene takes her coffee black in the morning. Three sugars, milk, and French Vanilla in the afternoon.”

“It looks like you’ve been studying hard.” Not-Kerene smiled. *“But, in here, it’s just you and I.”*

“What happened?”

“You had a mild seizure, from the looks of it. Everything went a little dark, and well, fade to black. We have each other though.” Not-Kerene insisted.

Will looked to the back door, and beyond the door was darkness. He slammed it open, staring into the abyss below. *Not-Kerene* stood behind him, her chin hooked over his shoulder.

“ *Welcome to our subconscious.”* She smirked, “ *It’s a long way home from here.”*

Kerene sat in the waiting room chair with her hands pressed into her face. She didn't know how long she'd been like that, but eventually the seconds blended into minutes. There was this sharp ringing in her ears, and she didn't know if it was coming from the speakers above or the back of her mind.

The voices were messy all around.

" *I'm here for a patient of mine. Will Graham."*

Kerene raised her head, looking to the front desk. Hannibal stood at the desk, his coat over his forearm. She rose out of her seat.

"I'm sorry, but he's currently in urgent care. He's not accepting visitors at this time-"

"Hannibal?" Kerene called.

He turned his attention to Kerene in the doorway, visibly shook up by the event. He started walking towards her. "I came as soon as I could." He stated, "I thought something might have happened to you."

Once he was in arm's reach, Kerene unashamedly put her arms around him to gain some form of comfort. To ground herself because she felt like the room was spinning, and the lights were flashing. She shut her eyes tightly, her head resting against Hannibal's chest. He smelt of Palo santo and patchouli, something she'd never realized before. The satin tie against her cheek was cooling, and smooth. She'd hate to cry on it, but couldn't control the impulse.

"It's *Will* ." She sobbed, staring up at him with her hands on his suit. "We were at lunch, and he started to tell me these horrible things. But when he came to me, he looked *sick* . I didn't want to believe it, because he'd just gotten onto new medication, and maybe he just needed some time to get used to it. But - then he collapsed. And they're saying it's a mild seizure-"

"Kerene. *Breathe."* Hannibal clasped his hands on her shoulders. "This is out of your hands. You don't have control over what might be happening to Will. He is being cared for. He will recover."

Kerene rubbed her eyes furiously. "If I had just listened to him in the first place, maybe he wouldn't have gotten so worked up."

"Here, sit." Hannibal gestured to the waiting room. "Walk me through it."

They sat down, facing each other. Kerene had a tissue in her hands, sniffling, and staring at the crumbled bit of tissue she began peeling apart. "Will called me this morning. He said he needed to talk, so we met for lunch."

"And did Will seem odd to you then?"

She nodded, "He was pacing outside like he'd just done something horrible."

"How horrible?"

She shrugged softly. “He was in a daze. Like he was looking through me.”

“You may have encountered him mid-episode.”

“I don’t know.” She sighed. “He looked pale. Like he didn’t sleep last night; he was sweating, and fidgeting. He wouldn’t look me in the eyes, kept looking over my shoulder.”

“Do you think Will was hallucinating?”

“I know he was. He told me he was still seeing things even on the medication, the people he couldn’t save, he could still see them. I told him he didn’t have to feel guilty about not being about to save everyone, but he was insistent.”

“Guilt can cause a man to do many things.”

Kerene shook her head. “Your doctor friend, he said he couldn’t find anything?”

“Not physically. Nothing came up in the MRI scans. Why the sudden interest?” Hannibal cocked his head aside.

“Will said he felt like his brain was on fire.”

Hannibal paused, gazing at Kerene blankly.

“Like there was an itch in his head he couldn’t get at.”

“ It may be part of his psychosis . Some people will say they experience such delusions as worms under their skin, and attempt to get them out by cutting themselves. Others believe they have planted chips under their skin, tracking their every movement.”

“This wasn’t a delusion, not that part at least. He was *genuine* .”

“For patients like Will, their mental disorder will obscure the line between reality and the real world. His inability to sleep and episodes cause him to lose time, he’ll have blanks of time where he can’t remember what he’s done, or where he’s been. Just where he was at the beginning, and where he is at that moment of coming back into the light.”

Kerene shook her head, thinking of Hannibal's words, and what Will said. “He didn’t tell you any of this?”

“He has told me about his irregular sleep schedules, and his loss of time. Nothing about experiencing cold sweats, or an insatiable itch.”

Kerene had a readable expression on, one full of conviction and persistency. “I want them to run another scan on Will.” She met Hannibal’s eyes, full of power and sure of herself.

“They didn’t find anything.”

“I *feel* like there’s something. Something we’re missing.” She stared at the torn tissue in her hands. “Run another MRI, PET scan, tap into his spine, I don’t care. Just find something.”

Hannibal nodded slowly. “You seem to know a lot about hospital procedures.”

Kerene turned away, “I don’t like hospitals. I never did.”

“May I ask why?”

Kerene always had a bias towards hospitals, it’s where sick people come to die and yet where babies are born. A place of ultimate prospect to either live or die, a median ground. “I just don’t.”

Hannibal nodded softly, and glanced to Kerene’s tissue. “I’ll see what I can do for Will.”

Kerene sat back finally, looking to the clock above the door. “Will’s been in intensive care for a while now.”

“He’s experienced a mild seizure, as you’ve said. They’re doing their best to regulate his current state.”

“What if Will isn’t the same after this? What if his personality changes because of what he went through?”

“There are endless possibilities; he may suffer personality change, or fatigue often, or even his behavior may alter.”

Kerene frowned.

“I can assure you, we’ll help Will as best as we can.” Hannibal placed his hand on Kerene’s forearm. “Right?”

Kerene nodded.

“Dr. Lecter.”

The two turned to see Dr. Sutcliffe standing in the hall to the waiting room. “Dr. Sutcliffe,” Hannibal stood, “Pleased to see you again.”

“Under these conditions, I apologize.”

“Are you examining Will?” Kerene stood beside Hannibal.

“When I heard he was in the hospital, I came down as quickly as I could. What do you know?” He glanced between the two.

“Will suffered an acute seizure, right now we have no idea what his condition is.”

Dr. Sutcliffe nodded, “Well, I can tell you Will’s condition is critical but he’s stable.”

“What does that mean?” Kerene asked.

“It means we have his vitals within normal limits, but he is in a serious condition. Possibly life threatening.”

Kerene almost found herself back to crying, she covered her eyes.

Hannibal pressed a hand to her back. “But you will do everything in your power to have him back on his feet, I’m sure.”

“I will do my best.”

“When can we see him?” Kerene asked.

“They’re finishing up with his stabilizing procedures, and then they’re going to see if he can accept visitors. He’s still unconscious.”

“Can you run another MRI?” Kerene said.

Sutcliffe slanted his eyes at Lecter. “What for?”

“Will insists he’s suffering from inflammation in his brain. Kerene wants to be sure we haven’t missed anything.”

“Run anything while you have the time; PET scan, Lumbar tests, blood count, *anything* .”

Hannibal pat Kerene’s shoulder, “Dr. Sutcliffe will do everything in his power to help understand what is happening to Will.”

Dr. Sutcliffe nodded. “If you’d excuse me. I’ll let you know about visiting.” He walked off.

Hannibal and Kerene were left to sit in the waiting room again for no more than half an hour, they were being guided down the corridor towards the ICU. Hannibal could see Kerene’s nervousness as they neared the room Will was in.

“Here we are.” Dr. Sutcliffe opened the door just as the nurse was finishing up on putting the EEG in place, Will’s brain waves being read in real time on screen.

Kerene wanted to flood to Will’s bedside, wrap her arms around him, and never let him out of her sight again. It just went to prove that they worked better together, and under each other’s watchful eye - they would have never fallen this far.

Hannibal watched Kerene’s cautious expression. “I’d like to have a word with Dr. Sutcliffe. In the meanwhile, make yourself feel at home.”

Kerene took her first step towards Will, and it felt like her bones turned to jelly. She flocked to his bedside, and looked down at his frazzled form. She reached out very warily, and clasped his warm hand. She pulled up a seat, and stared at Will’s closed eyes. He was no longer covered in sweat, no longer dazed and confused. He looked peaceful.

This was probably the first sleep he’d had in a while.

“I’m here, Will.” She whispered, leaning up, kissing his temple. “I’m right here, and I’m not going anywhere again.” Stroking his face gently, she sat back, keeping hold of his hand.

When Hannibal and Dr. Sutcliffe returned, her attention pivoted on them.

“Alright. When Will is better, we’ll run some tests on him and get to the bottom of this.” He insisted.

“When do you think he’ll wake up?” Kerene asked.

“We can’t be sure. He *did* suffer a seizure,” he glanced to Hannibal, “ *But* Will is a unique character. I’m sure he’ll be back to us by the morning.”

Kerene nodded.

“Thank you.” Hannibal said to the doctor, and he walked off. Hannibal lingered by the foot of the bed, looking between the inseparable pair. “Will you be staying the night in the hospital with Will?”

“Is that even a question?” She asked defensively.

“I only ask so I can bring you a change of clothes and something to eat.”

She deflated back down. “Yeah. I’m staying.”

Hannibal nodded, “Very well then. I’ll be back with a spare of clothes. You’ll update me on anything while I’m away?”

Kerene nodded.

Hannibal looked to Will, and exited the room.

Kerene glanced over her shoulder, and turned back to Will’s unmoved state. She leaned her head against the railing, gazing up at him. She stroked the back of his hand calmly, and shut her eyes.

Will paced frantically in the kitchen, the backdoor had still remained open, *Not-Kerene* now sat on the counter top watching him with a cup of coffee.

“You’ll only tire yourself out more by pacing.”

“I shouldn’t be here. I have to wake up. This is insane.”

“ *You want to know insane? Try being roommates with you.”*

“Shut up.”

Not-Kerene put her hands up. *“All I’m saying is we’re both here for the while. Why don’t we get to know each other? Step outside of this little warm house.”*

Will shut his eyes, standing before the back door. “This isn’t real. I’m going to wake up now.”

“Wish it was that easy, huh?”

Will opened his eyes, and he continued to stare into the abyss. He turned to *Not-Kerene.* “What’s out there?”

Not-Kerene shrugged. “ *How would I know? I don’t go lurking around in your subconscious. I’m every thought you’ve ever had, every nightmare, and every daydream. I just do what you want me to do.* ”

He pointed into the darkness, “I want to wake up.”

“ *I can’t help you with that-”*

“You said you do what I want you to-”

“It’s not that simple. You want to wake up, you would’ve already, right? What’s stopping you?” She stepped away from the counter. *“What’s so horrible about the real world that you’d rather stay down here? Tethered to unconsciousness?”*

Will paused.

Not-Kerene’s eye twitched, she cocked her head aside. *“No.”*

Will met her eyes.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You sly dog.” She smirked. “ *You don’t want to leave this place because you feel comfortable at home, not with me but with Kerene. I’m the spitting image of her, aren’t I?”*

“I need to get out of here.” He stepped towards the door.

“What do you think will happen when you step into that abyss? Do you think you’ll wake up? Or that you’ll face every bad thing you’ve ever encountered?”

He stood frozen in the doorway.

“The man who made angels out of people to watch over him, he was suffering from a tumor, an incurable disease because he didn’t seek out help fast enough. Maybe he’s out there.”

Will’s eyes tried to make shapes out of the dark.

“Or maybe that girl who couldn’t recognize faces, so she killed everything she saw. She thought she was dead. She is now, right? Your cop buddies made sure of it. I bet she’s around in your subconscious.”

Will shut his eyes, taking a deep breath.

“Or maybe Ivory Paine. The woman who went for a morning jog and never came back. The woman you kept envisioning Kerene as.”

He opened his eyes, looking at *Not-Kerene* in terror.

“ *I’m in your head. We’re in your head. I know every bad thing you’ve ever wanted. Every bad motive and killer you’ve become just to get closer to understand what they did. You enjoyed killing Garrett Jacob-Hobbs just like you enjoyed becoming Arthur-James Theodore and bashing Kerene’s head in with a rock. You want to go into that void so bad and find out what you really are like, why wait?”*

Not-Kerene appeared before Will, her foot wedged into his stomach.

“See you on the other side.” She kicked him into the darkness and like tar, he was slowly but inevitably swallowed. His lungs filled with tar, stuffing them tightly. His eyes burned as he tried to blink away the toxic chemical, and his wriggling was useless. *“Wake up.”*

Will’s eyes shot open and he gave a deep, howling breath as if he were coming up for air.

Kerene snapped out of her nap beside the hospital bed, and looked to the now very conscious Will. She slapped the emergency button as she stood over Will’s bed, her hands steadying Will’s shoulders to the bed.

“You’re okay. You’re okay.” She muttered over and over, “You’re safe, Will. It’s *me* .”

Will gazed up at her, his recognition kicking in, as soon as the nurse came in. She was just as surprised to see him awake.

After a long while of having a wellness check, checking his temperature, his vitals, his reaction time, and getting verbal answers from him - the room was cleared.

Kerene sat beside the hospital bed, watching Will.

Will, who’d been in a coma-like state for three days now, was awake.

He looked at her and, with much effort, smiled. “Hi.” He said in a raspy, quiet voice.

Kerene smiled back. “Hi.” She whispered.

“How long have you been here?”

“All day, all night.”

He looked to his hands, “I’m sorry-”

“No, Will, don’t start-”

“I am.”

“Will.” She reached across, holding his hands. “Look at me.”

He turned to her slowly.

“There isn’t a single thing that I wouldn’t do for you.” She stroked her thumb over his hand, “Okay?”

He nodded softly, tears forming in his already bloodshot eyes.

She stood up, wrapping her arms around Will, and Will held her back. He shut his eyes tightly, wanting to be held by her for the rest of his life. Kerene stroked the back of Will’s head, and kissed his temple. “Okay.” She mumbled, and stepped back. “I have to make a call. I’ll be right back.” She patted his cheek, and stepped into the hallway.

Will’s eyes fell on the room around him; Kerene’s coat had been left on the chair, his wallet, watch, and phone on the table. The remains of lunch had been kept in the container on the window sill, along with flowers and balloons. The balloons swayed gently in the window, saying *get well soon* and *feel better.* Will smiled softly at them, and down at the bouquet of flowers below them. They all had their own little cards, signed by his coworkers from both the lecture hall and the forensics team.

Kerene came back into the room, and rounded the bed to her seat.

“How long have I been in here?” Will asked.

Kerene paused, and took a deep breath. “You were in intensive care for two days.” She said, “They moved you to this room yesterday when you were stable.”

He stared in shock, “I’ve been here for three days.”

She nodded.

“Unconscious?” He began to sound worked up.

“It’s okay.” Kerene insisted. “You’re better than you were before. You’re stable now. It’s going to be okay.”

“I’ve been unconscious for three days. I don’t-” he shook his head, “How did I get here?”

“You fainted in the restaurant. You had a mild seizure.”

“Seizure?”

“Calm down.” She reached out, clasping his hand. “We’re going to find out what’s wrong with you. You just have to calm down, breathe, there is no danger. You didn’t miss anything.”

“What about the dogs?”

“Hannibal’s been feeding them. He’s been helping out a lot.”

Hannibal, the key factor in every equation. Hannibal *this* and Hannibal *that,* he was everywhere in Will's life, and he didn't know if he liked it anymore.

"Where is he?" Will asked.

"He's on his way here. I told him you were awake. He was happy. We've been worried about you. I'm happy you're awake now, and that you're okay."

He swayed his head, "Not okay."

"Average." She hummed.

" *Average* ."

She brushed back his curls as best as she could around the EEG wires, and sighed, bringing his hand to her face. "I'm thankful that you're okay, and that you're here."

Will gulped, letting himself be cradled and given affection, all while trying not to devour more.

Hannibal came into the room not long after. "Good morning, Will. I'm glad to see you've recovered." He stood at the foot of the bed. "How are you?"

"A mess."

Hannibal looked to the EEG monitor, "I'm told that you're recovering from your condition."

"That's what everyone is telling me." He glanced between Kerene and Hannibal. "Have they found anything?"

Hannibal paused. "I'm afraid not."

"But we'll find something." Kerene gazed up at Will.

He looked down at her, and the corner of his mouth turned up. "I guess I'm just chemically imbalanced." He joked.

"We all are, in some way." Hannibal noted, and stepped aside as a nurse came along with water for Will.

"Thank you." He accepted the cup, and weakly clasped it. He rested it on his lap instead, afraid to show how weak he truly felt in front of Kerene. "What's today's date?" He asked.

"November 27th." Lecter stated.

"And the time?"

He looked at his watch, " *6:48.* "

"Why?" Kerene questioned. "You missed a date or something?" She joked.

Will scoffed. “Could you call the nurse back in?” Will asked Hannibal, “I have to use the restroom.”

“Sure.” Hannibal turned for the hallway.

When he’d vanished from sight, Will turned to Kerene. “How long have you been here?”

“Is that even a real question?”

“How long has Hannibal been here?”

She shrugged, “He comes and goes, he has a job, you know?”

Will trailed off, “You do too.”

“You come first. I can find any job I want in the world, but if I don’t take care of you first,” she paused, her eyes tracing the IV bag tube in Will’s arm. She only smiled, and held his hand. “Well, then there’s no point of me being around, is there?”

Will tilted his head back as if to say *oh, come on, don’t say that.*

The nurse came in alongside Hannibal.

Will was escorted to the bathroom carefully, and Hannibal and Kerene were left alone again.

“Once Will proves he’s stable enough, they’ll discharge him.”

“I know.”

“What will you do then?”

“I have to watch after him.” She nodded, “He’s the last thing I have that’s close to family. Fights or not, I have to be there.”

Hannibal nodded, “Then I assume you’ll be moving out of the guest bedroom.”

“Will it always be open for me?”

Hannibal smiled, “Of course.”

Kerene smiled back as Will was escorted back to the bed. He needed some readjusting, pillow fluffing, and settling back into his comfortable uncomfortable position.

“Well, seeing as Kerene is here, my assistance isn’t needed.” Hannibal stated, “I’ll leave you to it.”

Kerene saluted flimsily.

Hannibal smiled. “I’ll be seeing you, Will. Hopefully outside of these walls when you’re better.”

“If I need anything, I’ll call.”

Hannibal nodded once more before leaving the room.

The pair looked to each other and gave a little laugh.

“He’s something.” Kerene mumbled.

“Sure.”

Caught in a fit of staring, the pair watched each other.

“What?” Kerene questioned.

“Thank you.”

“For what? I didn’t do anything.”

“You’ve done more than I ever deserved. I don’t deserve you-”

“You stop it.” She pointed, “You are more deserving than half the people on this Earth. You deserve the world and *more* .”

“I feel the world has a different opinion of me-“

“Screw them then.”

Will met her eyes.

“We’ve got each other, and we’re not going anywhere anytime soon.” She smiled, “You and me, against the world.”

Will smiled back softly, and paused. “Do you think I could get something to eat? I’m starving.”

“Sure. I’ll call the nurse and see if we can.” Kerene left the room momentarily.

“Round of applause for Will Graham on his acting; you almost had me.” Not-Kerene sat in Kerene’s seat.

Will looked to her. “Go away.”

“ *That is one thing I can’t do, partner. It’s you and me, against the world.”* She mocked.

Will looked to the monitors, and to his EEG monitor. His readings were suddenly erratic.

“ *Say, you’re not getting any funny ideas are you?” Not-Kerene* hummed. “ *It would be a shame if we were to split so soon.”*

Will looked to *Not-Kerene.*

“Until the end of the line, you and I.”

Will didn’t get a full course meal but enough to assure he wouldn’t be hungry for the next hour. Kerene and him watched TV for a bit, he was given a sponge bath, and returned to his spot on the bed. As night fell, Kerene pulled the recliner back, and lied on her side.

For some time, she was quiet. Will watched her sleep, and smiled to himself. Her hand was extended out, as if reaching out to hold Will’s hand, and tempted - Will clasped her palm gently.

As if reacting on reflexes, Kerene’s hand closed around his.

Someone cleared their throat in the doorway.

Will turned to see Hannibal standing with a vase of flowers in hand.

“Good evening. I don’t mean to disturb you.” Hannibal said. “I thought you would’ve been asleep.”

“It’s kind of hard to when I’ve been asleep for the last three days.”

“I see.” Hannibal set his vase on the table. “I wanted to give you my condolences.”

“For?”

“Being in the hospital. I know it’s a disliked place.”

“It’s not like you had a hand in this.”

Hannibal swayed, “I spoke with Dr. Sutcliffe about your results. He ran you through another set of tests, to check for autoimmune diseases.”

“And?”

“We checked for any sort of encephalitis, as Kerene suspected, but the results were inconclusive.”

“Inconclusive? What does that mean? Do I have it or *not* ?” Will said in aggravation.

Hannibal’s eyes skewed to the EEG.

Kerene shuffled in the chair, hands still tied together. Will corrected himself, shutting his eyes, and taking a deep breath.

“I’m sorry.” Hannibal turned away from the steadying EEG readings. “There is nothing more we can do but wait. There is no other diagnosis we can depend on.”

“Other than I’m crazy.” Will scoffed.

“We will find a way to help you.”

Will nodded, glancing to Kerene, and back. “Thanks for watching the dogs.”

“It’s my pleasure. But I do have to say, the Alentejo is quite rowdy.”

“ *Casper.”* Will chuckled.

“He’s a loyal dog. He waits on the porch for you to come home every time.”

Will frowned, “The way it sounds, I’m not coming home anytime soon.”

“In time.” Hannibal insisted.

Will looked to the flowers in the vase, and back to Kerene, her grip never loosening from his own. He smiled softly, admiring her peaceful features. “I know you can’t talk about it,” he looked to Hannibal, “But how is she?”

Hannibal paused, “She’s coping. With the last event, you bringing her into the field, it wounded her. Opened her up to trauma she wanted to avoid.”

Will gave a sullen pout.

“She has unresolved trauma, and she wants to work on it. But she can’t if you keep pushing her away. She cares for you deeply, almost more than her own health. I hope you consider your actions next time around.” His tone was seemingly sour.

Will couldn’t bring himself to say another word.

“I’ll leave you to rest,” Hannibal turned for the door. “I’ll give you a word in advance if something comes up with Dr. Sutcliffe. Good night.”

Hannibal left Will to hang in suspended silence, to sink further into an abyss of self loathing. He wasn’t worthy to hold Kerene’s hand, someone who’d constantly put Will before anything else; before work, before bills, before herself, and everyone in line. Kerene stated that she’d put Will before anything else because there would be no other point to her life, has he really tied her down to believe that? Had he poisoned her and trapped her to make her believe this is all there was to life?

Will slipped his hand from Kerene’s gently, and as best as he could, he rolled aside facing the door.

Not-Kerene had slipped in behind him, fitting into the mold of his back, making him feel cold and suffocated in the bed. She wrapped her arm around his waist, her cold breath on the back of his neck. *“Maybe it’s better this way. Just you and I, alone. I mean, after all, no one can hurt us this way. No one can hurt you, Will.” Not-Kerene* said, almost sounding sincere and soft spoken.

Will's eyes began to tear up, he shut his eyes tightly, trying to block out the voice.

"We can live alone on the ranch with the dogs; far, far away from the world. No one would question you being away, they'll think you've moved. They won't come looking, no one will come bothering." Not-Kerene stroked Will's hair down. *"Just you and I. Against the world. Wouldn't that be fun?"*

Will's tears fell down his face and onto the bed sheets.

"Don't cry." Not-Kerene rested her cheek against Will's, shutting her eyes, and smiling. *"The pain will go away soon enough."* She whispered, clutching Will tightly in a non-comforting way. *"It'll all go away."*

Dr. Sutcliffe had just been packing up for the night when he heard a knocking on his door. He looked up to greet Hannibal's eyes. "Hannibal?" He questioned, "What're you doing here?"

"I was visiting Will Graham and thought I'd drop in and say *hello."* Hannibal smiled.

"Right." Dr. Sutcliffe threw on his jacket.

"You're leaving for the night?"

"I am."

"I'll walk you out. If it's no trouble."

They began walking through the corridor towards the elevators.

"I actually wanted to speak to you about Will." Hannibal said once they stepped into the elevator.

"What about?"

"His condition."

Dr. Sutcliffe nodded. "What of it?"

"His roommate, Kerene, she proves to be a problem when it comes to remaining oblivious." Hannibal said, "She's smart."

"She approached me about testing for possible encephalitis."

"And what did you say?"

"That I would try my best."

"And did she react well?"

“She believes me.”

Hannibal nodded.

“What other effects have you studied from Will Graham?” Dr. Sutcliffe asked.

“He experiences episodes of lost time; he appears conscious, but completely unaware of his surroundings. His ability to decipher between reality and visions are obscured, without affirmation of the current date, he’s oblivious.” Hannibal unfolded a piece of paper from his pocket, “He drew this the other day, I told him to draw a clock.”

Dr. Sutcliffe stared at the abstract clock.

“He suffers from spatial dysfunction.”

“This is amazing.” Dr. Sutcliffe hummed, handing back the paper.

They continued out to the parking lot.

“How much more time do you need to study him?”

“All of it.”

“You don’t suggest running Will to the ground? He’s already reaching his limit. I took a look at his EEG reading while he was asleep, and they were more than unstable. Giving him even the smallest supplement of Rituxan can slow the risk of him having another episode-”

“Will is a medical miracle. I know the limits of his strength.”

“Right.”

Hannibal stood before Sutcliffe. “Whatever it takes, destroy the copies of his encephalitis. Deny any sickness. And you will have yourself the achievement of discovering and studying Will’s sickness.”

Sutcliffe nodded.

“Have a good night, doctor.”

“You too.” Dr. Sutcliffe hummed, and Hannibal walked away from his car. Sutcliffe watched him, squinting his eyes, and glancing back to the hospital.

Dr. Sutcliffe had a feeling that Hannibal’s morals were skewed, but - he kept his head down and continued to do his work. Sutcliffe would keep his eye on Hannibal with suspicion, and monitor Will’s recovery.

And the world would go on spinning.

Chapter End Notes

I just love the tender and personal moments between Will and Kerene. Very wholesome. Stay tuned for more. :)

End Notes

Comment your every feeling, thought, and prophecy when you've come across something you believe to be a hidden message (and believe me, there's a ton!) Take care and be safe! :)

Chapter updates first and third Wednesday of the month.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!